

HUMOR ALERT: MUSLIM AND ARAB STAND-UP COMEDY IN POST-9/11
UNITED STATES

A Thesis

by

ANDREEA SILVIA MICU

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2012

Major Subject: Performance Studies

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ABSTRACT

Humor Alert: Muslim and Arab Stand-Up Comedy in Post-9/11 United States. (May 2012)

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After 9/11, American stand-up comedy includes an increasing presence of Arab and Muslim comedians whose humor engages some of the recurring Islamophobic stereotypes circulating in the United States. These comedians combine self-deprecating humor and critique of American society. In doing so, they continue a rich tradition of American ethnic comedy, first used by other minorities to negotiate positive recognition of their ethnicities in American society. Although Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy continues to grow, there is little academic analysis of it. My research attempts to fill this gap. I examine two video-recorded comedy tours, *Allah Made Me Funny* and *The Axis of Evil*, and draw on my experiences as participant observer at the 8th annual edition of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival. In my examination, I explore Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy after 9/11 as a set of performances that challenge Islamophobic political discourses and contest stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims circulating in the media and popular culture.

I begin this thesis with a discussion that defines Islamophobia after 9/11 as a pervasive ideological formation and explores the relationship between Islamophobia and stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims in the media and popular culture. Second, I identify political activism, personal narrative, as well as both artistic and historical opportunism as complex and interrelated dimensions of this stand-up comedy. Third, I examine how Arab and Muslim American comedians use humor to navigate the poles of their hyphenated identities and negotiate their belonging in American society. Finally, I examine the ways in which stand-up comedy reverses the discourses and representations of Islamophobia by drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
ISLAMOPHOBIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE “OTHER”	6
Definitions of Islamophobia.....	6
Islamophobia and American Politics.....	10
Islamophobia, Hegemony, and Popular Culture	15
Islamophobia and Racial Formation	18
DIMENSIONS OF ARAB AND MUSLIM AMERICAN STAND-UP COMEDY	23
Stand-up Comedy as Political Activism.....	28
Stand-up Comedy as Historical Opportunity	33
Stand-up Comedy as Personal Narrative.....	38
Stand-up Comedy as Artistic Opportunity	42
Normative Communities of Humor and the Reach of Stand-up Comedy.....	45
STAND-UP COMEDY, IDENTITY, AND NATIONAL BELONGING	49
The Comedian as “Other”	50
Marginality on Stage	53
The Struggle for Positive Recognition	57
STAND-UP COMEDY AND BAKHTINIAN CARNIVAL	66
The Upside Down Logic	67
Playing with Reality and Image	71
The Carnavalesque Body	73
Carnavalesque Utopia and the Social Order	76
CONCLUSION	83

REFERENCES.....	87
VITA	93

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, many Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedians have found that dealing with the assumptions about Arabs and Muslims currently circulating in American society and the media is both an appropriate and profitable opportunity for political activism. Comedy tours such as *Allah Made Me Funny*, *The Axis of Evil* and *Arabs Gone Wild*; and artists such as Azhar Usman, Mo Amer, Ahmed Ahmed, Aron Kader, Preacher Moss, Dean Obidallah, Maz Jobrani, and Maysoon Zayid enjoy increasing success because of their particular combination of self-deprecating humor and critique of the prejudices about Arabs and Muslims circulating in American society. In the face of their struggle, Arab and Muslim American comedians have realized that they can use humor as a platform to comment on the issues affecting their ethnic and religious groups. At the same time, these comedians have found a way to make a living out of a very marketable genre. If at the beginning of their foray into ethnic comedy, the larger part of their audience comprised fellow Arab and Muslim Americans, their subsequent performances increasingly bring together people with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Stand-up comedy has been used by other minorities, such as Jews and African Americans, as a tool to negotiate assimilation and positive recognition into the American “melting pot.” The combination of social critique and self-deprecation has brought

This thesis follows the style of *Journal of American Folklore*.

success to different ethnic stand-up comedians in the past, such as Jack Benny, Lenny Bruce, Richard Prior, and more recently Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, Margaret Cho and Sarah Silverman. Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy shares some of the characteristics of this longstanding tradition of American ethnic comedy. However, the post-9/11 socio-political context makes Arabs and Muslims in the United States face different problems of integration than those of other groups. Among these problems, the influence of contemporary geopolitical events is crucial. Islamic terrorism, political conflicts in the Middle East, the United States' involvement in these conflicts, and post-9/11 feelings of Islamophobia sustained by a large number of Americans and backed up by political measures such as the PATRIOT ACT, contextualize and define the struggle of Arab and Muslim Americans for positive recognition.

In this thesis, I explore how Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedians use humor to address Islamophobic stereotypes circulating in post-9/11 American society, discussing the extent to which these comedians challenge and contest these stereotypes. I examine both live and recorded performances. The recorded shows are *Allah Made Me Funny* and *The Axis of Evil* comedy tours, both released on DVD. In addition to examining the recorded performances, I draw on my experience as participant observer at the 8th annual edition of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival. The 8th edition brought together approximately forty comedians of Arab descent and mixed national and religious heritages to perform at the Gotham Comedy Club in NYC from the 25th through the 29th of September 2011.

My selection of this research focus—the two recorded comedy tours and the Festival—is due to their mainstream status in the scene of Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy. These performances and comedians form the most popular and visible part of the Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy scene of the last years. The Festival, however, reaches a smaller audience than the recorded shows, which have made a greater impact beyond Arab and Muslim American audiences. In this thesis, while I discuss the Festival’s audience based on my experience at the 8th annual edition, I talk about the recorded performances’ audience as intended or potential.

Throughout the thesis I use the phrase “Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedians” to refer to the performers I study, as a group. Indeed, the comedians that I examine hardly form a unified ethnic or religious group. Some of them are both Arab and Muslim; some of them are Arabs who either follow a religion different than Islam or have publicly stated or alluded to not have any religious beliefs altogether; and some of them are Muslims of an ethnicity other than Arab. For instance, the *Allah Made Me Funny* comedy tour features Muslim comedians Azhar Usman, of Indian descent; Preacher Moss, who is African-American; and Mo Amer, a Palestinian American. *The Axis of Evil* comedy tour features Middle Eastern comedians: Palestinian Americans Dean Obidallah and Aron Kader, Egyptian American Ahmed Ahmed, and Iranian American Maz Jobrani. The comedians of *The Axis of Evil* have regularly performed in the Arab American Comedy Festival since its beginnings. Moreover, Dean Obidallah co-founded the Festival in 2003. Certainly, the main feature that all of them share is their

on-stage self-positioning as targets of post-9/11 Islamophobic stereotyping that hails them into the category of the “other” of American society.

In the thesis I put my analysis of the recorded comedy tours in dialogue with my ethnographic experiences as participant observer at the Festival. I look at the textual content of the jokes, how the comedians stage the jokes, and what they embody with their performances on the stage. Because these comedians speak from a common condition of the “other” but present particularities regarding their religious/ethnic backgrounds, I also examine their public presentations of identity in interviews, documentaries, and public statements, in relation to their self-presentations on stage. By doing so, I show that these comedians create moments of symbolic reversal in which they undermine the legitimacy of Islamophobic stereotypes and offer alternative portrayals of Arab and Muslim American identities than those available in the media, Islamophobic political speeches, and in American popular culture.

I have organized this thesis into four sections. In the first section, I discuss the social, political and historical context in which Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy originated and grew after 9/11. I explain Islamophobia as an ideological formation that ascribes to Arabs and Muslims an abject identity by representing them as inherently violent and irrational. Such images draw on historical discourses about the “other” of Western societies, such as Orientalism, and employ racial prejudices to create a Manichean divide between supposedly concrete yet always not fully determinate categories of “us” and “them.” Although such binaries have their origins in political speeches informed by specific political interests, they appear to be a matter of common

sense and are pervasive in the media and popular culture representations of Arabs and Muslims. Section 2 provides a discussion of Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy after 9/11 as a complex phenomenon that entails political activism and personal narrative, responses to specific historical circumstances and the exploitation of artistic opportunity by Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedians. It also discusses whether this kind of stand-up comedy merely reaches those audiences who do not hold Islamophobic prejudices. In the third section I discuss how these comedians navigate the different poles of their hyphenated identity—Arab/Muslim and American—on stage to legitimate their role confronting Islamophobic stereotypes. I show that their conscious shift between adopting the place of the insider and that of the outsider of American society draws on longstanding traditions of ethnic humor in the United States and comments upon American cultural values. Finally, in the last section I examine Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy as a potentially subversive force that reverses social power structures and constructs an idealistic, utopian future in which Islamophobia has no place.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE “OTHER”

In this section I discuss the social, political and historical context in which Muslim and Arab stand-up comedy has originated and developed in the United States over the last decade. Because this genre is deeply intertwined with the phenomenon of Islamophobia in the United States since the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I discuss the origins of Islamophobia and its political, historical, religious and racial dimensions. I indicate that Islamophobia has a wider geography and a longer history. However, I focus on Islamophobia in the United States after 9/11 as an ideology that constructs Muslims, Arabs, and occasionally other social groups as “others” to American society. In doing so, I examine the literature about Islamophobia written over the last decade by social scientist in the American context. I also examine the relation between Islamophobia and Orientalism. Finally, I address the presence of Islamophobic discourses in the media and popular culture and I situate Muslim and Arab stand-up comedy in these discourses.

Definitions of Islamophobia

Islamophobia is one of those words about which much has been written and yet resist a fixed definition. The term gained popularity in the 1990s (Kalin 2011: 8) and has been widely used in the United States after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. However, the phenomenon of Islamophobia is neither limited to American society nor exclusively a result of the terrorist attacks. In this section I take Stephen Sheeni’s (2011) definition of

Islamophobia as an “ideological formation” of hatred and fear against all Muslims, most Arabs, and—occasionally—anyone erroneously perceived as Arab or Muslim. For Sheeni, “an ideological formation is created by a culture that deploys particular tropes, analyses and beliefs, as fact upon which governmental policies and social practices are framed” (31). Sheeni's idea of discursive formation goes back to Michael Foucault (1972), who talks about such formations as truth claims that are inserted in contexts of power relations and institutional and political practices. For Foucault, “to reveal in all its purity the space in which discursive events are deployed is [...] to leave oneself free to describe the interplay of relations within it and outside it” (29). Following Sheeni and Foucault I argue that Islamophobia is a discursive and ideological formation, embedded in historical, political, social, religious and racial relationships between the Western world and a discursively constructed “other” that is differentiated according to a set of supposedly innate and essential attributes antagonistic to the Western culture and civilization. Because Islamophobia is a set of discursive practices, the boundaries of the social groups who form the “others” are necessarily blurry. Islamophobia targets many subjects who do not follow Islam. It can sometimes overlap with Arabophobia, but extends to groups who are not Arab. Also, Islamophobia does not necessarily imply a Western actor. Arabs or other individuals from other ethnicities who position themselves against Islam can sustain Islamophobic viewpoints.

Etymologically Islamophobia denotes a stance against Islam but, paradoxically, religion is the least important of all the dimensions underlying Islamophobia. In fact, many of the authors who have examined Islamophobia in the last decade think that the

aversion directed at Islam exceeds a strictly religious dimension. Furthermore, as an ideological formation, Islamophobia cannot be separated from historical events involving Western relations with the Muslim and Arab world. Among such events, the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 on American territory occupy a central position. However, 9/11 is not the primary cause of Islamophobia, although specific socio-political actors may have special interests in justifying the hatred against Muslims as the response of Western societies to the real or imaginary threat of Islamic fundamentalism. The narratives that construct post-9/11 Islamophobia “can perhaps be defined as the disciplining of Muslims by reference to an antagonistic Western horizon” (Sayyid 2010: 15). In this regard, Islamophobia comprises a range of fabricated discourses that seek to put Muslims in a marginal position in the current world order.

There are different views about the origins of Islamophobia. In fact, part of the problem with the concept of Islamophobia comes from a debate about whether all the historical conflicts between the Muslim world and the West are instances of Islamophobia, or whether it is even useful to analyze past historical events under the frame of Islamophobia, which is a modern term. Some authors argue that this phenomenon did not begin with the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Such authors, like John Exposito and Ibrahim Kalin place the origins of Islamophobia in the last century. They observe that its contemporary form “has been triggered by the significant influx of Muslims in the West since the late 20th century, the Iranian revolution, hijackings, hostage-takings and acts of terrorism in the 1980s and 1990s [...], 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks in Europe” (2011: xxii). Others believe it is part of the longer, centuries-

old, encounters between the Western world and Islam. For instance, Susaina Maira writes that “the genealogy of Islamophobia can be traced to the encounter between European colonialism and Islam, which emerged from the Western colonization of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia and is embedded in the larger context of the construction of the ‘other’ in Western modernity” (2011: 110). Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg (2008) go even further, asserting that Islamophobia has existed since Islam began to spread in the seventh century.

Aiming for a more complex understanding, S. Sayyid rightly suggests that the view of Islamophobia as a continuum running through history “fails to pay due attention to the very different contexts in which antagonism to Islam and Muslim emerge” (2010: 16). In his view, particular discourses can be re-articulated for different purposes in different historical times. Islamophobia is a specifically postcolonial development. Similarly, Stephen Sheeni believes that current Islamophobia is different from past constructions of Arabophobia, Orientalism and racism, although it is influenced by those phenomena. For Sheeni, Islamophobia is an “ideological formation of the US Empire” (2011: 31). He suggests that in the need of the United States to find a new enemy after the fall of the Soviet Union, it has spread derogatory stereotypes about the Muslim world as part of a broad imperialist political project that exceeds particular goals of any political party. Sheeni examines specific examples in which political leaders, popular media figures, and think tanks have advanced a rhetoric full of misconceptions and simplifications about Islam. He shows that prejudices against Muslims were at their highest peak immediately after 9/11, making possible a hateful rhetoric in the media that

would be unacceptable if directed against other groups. However, his analysis is limited to Islamophobia as an American problem of imperialism, hence it ignores that propaganda does not construct an enemy out of the blue. Rather, hostile propaganda works effectively because it draws upon existing misconceptions. If 9/11 is a defining moment in the construction of Islamophobia, it is because it was the catalyst needed to legitimate older Western misconceptions about the Muslim world, which have been reinforced throughout history along every conflict between the two. With 9/11, the Western fear of the Muslim “other” has found its latest legitimation.

Islamophobia and American Politics

It is important to historicize Islamophobia and to understand “the political and cultural processes that underwrite the construction of subjects as ‘Muslim’” because such a gesture “reveals the larger political forces that are at work in the war on terror and that are linked to issues of domination, othering, and dissent” (Susaina Maira 2011: 109). Politically, Islamophobia is embedded in hegemonic discourses that specific political agents have produced in the quest for power. However, it also gets spread in society to facilitate the production and maintenance of stereotypes about Muslims and whoever is *perceived* to be Muslim. Over the last years, the Council of American-Islamic Relations has annually published reports about Islamophobia in the United States after 9/11. The CAIR indicates that one in four Americans holds prejudices against Muslims and believe that Islam is a religion of hatred and violence. One fifth of the

respondents think that civil liberties of Muslims should be restricted because of security reasons (CAIR 2006, 2007).

Politics in the United States has been influential in shaping Western ideas about Muslims in the domestic and international realms (Nimer 2007, Sheeni 2011, Smith 2010, Welch 2006). In fact, since the 1980s, many neoconservative think tanks have produced an extensive literature legitimating the ideological campaign against Islam in order to facilitate the program of an American political elite whose imperialistic projects involve military and economic interventions in places of the world inhabited by Muslims (Malik 2006). In a further demonstration of the connection between neoconservative politics and Islamophobia, the Center for American Progress (2011) has recently reported that since 9/11, neoconservative political organizations have financed both legitimate and pseudo-intellectual figures to proselytize about the dangers of Islam to the United States.

Pervasive negative stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims spread well beyond the readers and audiences of the far-right ideologues, as “some of the anti-Arab racism generated on the right finds its way subtly to political analysis of the left” (Salaita 2008: 12)¹. Salaita analyzes in detail a number of discourses coming from progressive ideologues, politicians, and media figures that are equally aberrant in their simplifications of Arab identity and the socio-political circumstances of Arab nations.

¹ Salaita talks specifically about anti-Arab racism, as he considers this term more accurate than Islamophobia. However, I argue that anti-Arab racism is already part of Islamophobic discourses, which affect another ethnic groups beside Arabs.

He argues that, ultimately, these discourses are especially dangerous because they come wrapped in the alleged good intentions of the speakers.

The idea that American society is in a “state of exception” (Maira 2011: 111) is the construct of a power elite to justify the policing of Arabs and Muslims as a necessary condition of national security. Because of this construct, American citizens are likely to reinforce prejudices towards Arabs and Muslims, and prone to accept the perpetration of an abuse on Muslims that would otherwise be unacceptable in the domestic context and in international conflicts (Salaita 2006). These abuses range from ordinary practices of discrimination to severe attacks in the form of hate crimes. In effect, all Arabs and Muslims have become the scapegoats of 9/11 (Welch 2006). Scapegoating arising from domestic security policies created after 9/11 have curtailed personal freedom and privacy for Muslims and Arabs, and led to serious abuses of their rights such as prolonged detention of suspects without charges. In some cases, people eventually proved to have no terrorist connections have been held in detention without a formal charge for months. These detentions have often occurred in secrecy and isolation and limited the detainees' rights to legally prescribed counsel. David Cole shows that these abusive practices border illegality and stretch normal protocols for justified detention of non-citizens (2003: 33). Ironically, many of the abusive methods employed by the Bush Administration ultimately proved to be very limited as ways of finding and arresting terrorists (Cole 2003: 183-208). However, these methods were extremely effective in spreading fear among American Muslims and Arabs, who felt vulnerable and

unprotected, as evident in their stories of alienation, collected by ethnographers in the past years (Bayoumi 2008, Cole 2003, Nguyen 2005).

The fear of a potential Arab and Muslim threat accounts for the fact that many Americans were initially supportive of profiling policies, at least immediately after 9/11 (Cainkar 2009, Cole 2003). However, as David Cole (2003) argues, the Bush Administration soon extended its initial campaign against the rights of “enemy aliens” into a number of initiatives that curtailed privacy rights, even for American citizens, but especially for American citizens of Arab or Middle Eastern heritage, or Muslim religion. The most relevant of these initiatives was the PATRIOT ACT, created in October 2001. The PATRIOT ACT expanded the abilities of the law enforcement agencies to search private telephone and email communications and other records without having any evidence of criminal activity. It also limited the fundamental rights of Arab and Muslim Americans, such as political association, free speech, and privacy.

Although 9/11 and the consequent reactions of the American political elite have helped spread Islamophobia, Islamophobia itself is infused with ideologies of suspicion against Muslims and Arabs that originated much earlier in history. Current Islamophobia is intertwined with Orientalism in complex ways. As theorized by Edward Said (1979), Orientalism refers to pervasive Western assumptions that irrational and barbaric people inhabit the Orient. These assumptions legitimated colonialism by fostering the idea that the Orient needed the tutelage from the West to overcome their backwardness and enter modernity. Orientalism constructs abstract images of the colonized “others,” without acknowledging the circumstances in which those “others” live and the particularities of

their culture and history. In this sense, it overlaps with Islamophobia, which would not exist without prior Orientalist traditions of thought in which the West is seen as superior, a paradigm of civilization and rationality. However, Islamophobia differs from Orientalism in several aspects. First, while Orientalism often involves an exotic fascination with the East, Islamophobia draws on Orientalism but it is mainly an ideology of hatred and fear, excluding any fascination. It is right to argue that a fascination of that kind could never be innocent—because precisely by putting the Oriental “others” in an imaginary realm, the West justified conquest and colonization. However, far from innocent, Orientalist representations were not necessarily, or always, based on hatred. Second, Orientalism did not limit its reach to Arab or Muslim countries, but affected the domination of other places such as China, Japan, and India. Consequently, Orientalism exceeds misconceptions about Islam. Paradoxically, Islamophobia can also exceed Islam, for it can target subjects who are not Muslim. In fact, one of the most common victims of (wrong) profiling of potential Muslim terrorists have been Sikhs, who are neither Arabs nor Muslims. Third, Orientalism is a relation between East and West in which “the West moved upon the East, not vice versa” (Said 1979: 73). Islamophobia, however, is precisely the fear fueled by Western impressions that the East can fight back. Not surprisingly, 9/11 has been so decisive in the spread of Islamophobia, because of the American perception that the ostracized “others” have the means to attack “us.” That perception is fueled by misguided conceptions about migration and an increasing Arab and Muslim population in the United States over the last century. Orientalism comes from the West’s assumption of its superiority to the

East; Islamophobia comes from the Western need to confront the fact that superiority is a construction, because the “other” is now a part of “our” society. Historically, Islamophobia and Orientalism have developed along the lines of different—yet related—encounters between the West and the Eastern “other”: what European colonialism was to Orientalism, American imperialism is to Islamophobia.

Islamophobia, Hegemony, and Popular Culture

Ideologies of hatred and fear may originate from political interests, but penetrate society and become hegemonic through the possibilities that culture provides. That media can and does influence politics by whipping up public support for specific political projects of the United States in the Arab World is not new. This process goes back well before 9/11 and has continued ever since (Hafez 2000, Said 1997, Pintak 2006). Moreover, Islamophobic discourses are not only located in political speeches and news media but are nearly always also embedded in popular culture. Popular culture bears the power “to form public opinion and to perpetuate historically widely held false beliefs and myths concerning peoples, faiths, and cultures whose right to self-identify we fail—or perhaps fear—to comprehend” (Al-Shaikh-Ali 2011: 144). Popular culture representations of Arabs and Muslims tend to be stereotypical and consistent with the representations of actual Arabs and Muslims in the news. Fictional and documental representations tend to share similar narrative frameworks, in which Muslims and Arabs are rarely depicted in a favorable way. In the result, Arabs become “exemplars of

violence not because they commit terrorism in disproportionate numbers, but because they are represented disproportionately as terrorists” (Salaita 2008: 88).

Addressing popular culture representations of Arabs and Muslims, Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg (2008) look at political cartoons published in American newspapers over recent decades, that relate to political events—usually involving polemic issues between the United States and a Middle Eastern country. They find that in these images the Muslim “other” is more often than not portrayed as an angry Arab man, usually with a beard and wearing on their heads either the cotton scarf traditional in Saudi Arabia or a turban. Muslim women appear only when the cartoon message deals with their supposed oppression, for which there is no contextual information, leading to the impression that all women across the Muslim world live under similar conditions. These authors conclude that Islamophobia “results for most from distant social experiences that mainstream American culture has perpetuated in popular memory, which are in turn buttressed by a similar understanding of current events” (5).

Jack G. Shaheen (2001, 2008) looks at how Hollywood films have reinforced stereotypes of Arabs both prior to and after 9/11. His brief and superficial analysis of the representations suggests that his work is aimed more at a popular public than at academics. However, it usefully provides a copious number of popular films that, consciously or not, spread negative images about Arabs and those perceived to be Arab. The sheer number—hundreds of examples—of Shaheen’s Arabophobic representations in widely known films, paints a striking, compelling picture of how Islamophobic

perceptions are relentlessly forged in the eyes of millions of spectators in Western societies. The question remains whether viewers who ignore cultural and ethnic differences between Arabs, Middle Eastern people, or South Asian Muslims for instance, have the means to understand that the images they are watching are not necessarily accurate representations of those social groups.

With a deeper and more extensive analysis, Tim Jon Semmerling (2006) looks at several American major films produced since the 1970s. He explains how their construction of the Arab “other” as the evil enemy that ultimately escapes defeat, leaves Americans with a feeling of ever-present danger that this enemy may strike back at any moment. Semmerling compares five fiction films² with the CNN documentary *America Remembers*, created in 2002 as a tribute to the September 11th events. Semmerling observes that both the fictional films and the documentary share similar narrative structures. He states that, as “CNN interprets September 11th in term of [...] myths in order to impose horror, to elicit emotion, and to designate the Arabs as ‘evil’, as well as to regenerate an American sense of strength, pride, and heroism” (209), fictional and documental representations of the Arab “other” become intertwined in the same universe of images for American audiences. These authors contest assumptions that popular culture representations are politically neutral.

² The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973); Rules of Engagement (William Friedkin, 2000); Three Kings (David O. Russell, 1999); Black Sunday (John Frankenheimer, 1977); Rollover (Alan J. Pakula, 1981).

Islamophobia and Racial Formation

Beside its political, historical, and religious dimensions, Islamophobia ties into racist assumptions about Arabs, Muslims, or individuals of other ethnicities mistaken for Arab or Muslims. These racist assumptions are evident in circumstances involving security related terrorist profiling. It is not difficult to see that some instances of profiling that the American government has deployed after 9/11—airport profiling, for instance—are based on essentialist assumptions about how a terrorist *looks* like. Profilers take physical traits such as skin color, hair texture, or facial features as external signs of an alleged terrorist identity. Post-9/11 profiling of Muslims and Arabs has created the impression among the American population that “Arab and Muslim identity is a central, perhaps the central factor for suspicions of terrorism,” and that ethnic appearance is reliable for judging someone’s intentions (Cole 2003: 53). In the aftermath of 9/11, passengers complaining to airlines’ staff about someone’s brown skin or other physical aspect have caused several incidents in which airlines ordered passengers off the plane for no actual reason except their perceived ethnicity (46). In fact, the CAIR annual reports indicate that airports are one of the most common places in which discrimination of Arabs and Muslims happens (2006, 2007).

The above said, not all targets of Islamophobia automatically suffer racism. Muslim African-Americans, white Muslims—or, for that matter, people of Arab heritage that look white—do not all face the same racist challenges. Racism directed at African-American Muslims is part of a broader history of racism and structures of white privilege in American society. White Muslims and people of Arab heritage that look

white may encounter Islamophobia but not racism. What is specific to the relation between racism and Islamophobia is the stereotype of Islam as being a religion whose subjects present a brown skin aspect. Officially, Arabs are considered white for purposes of registration or immigration, although on a day-to-day reality they inhabit a liminal category in which they face challenges unknown to other white Americans.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) argue that ideas about racial categories and who belongs to them change over time but always use phenotypical traits to legitimate ideologically constructed ways of classifying human bodies. Race is always discursive and definitions of race do not only depend on political and social projects but are boosted by social agents in attempts to engage others in their discourse. Ultimately, beyond the process of defining people according to races there is a complex matrix of social struggles seeking power and hegemony. In this sense, it is not surprising that Islamophobic discourses seek to present the Arabs as not white.

Louise Cainkar addresses the difficulty of considering Arabs as a race and, at the same time, Arabs' reluctance to self-identify as white (2009: 96). She suggests that the present racial construction of Arabs as non-whites has not always existed as such in the United States. In fact, the process that transformed the racial image of Arabs, whose integration had included many of the privileges denied to other minorities, began in last decades of the twentieth century. By 9/11 the general American assumption was already what Cainkar calls the "Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern phenotype," which means not only being non-white, but also "social pariah and political outcast" (72). Cainkar separates anti-Arab racism from the racism suffered by other minorities throughout American

history. She recognizes that the racialization of these minorities was a consequence of white America seeking to exclude minorities from economic resources and political participation on a domestic realm. She asserts, nevertheless, that it was the Israeli-Arab wars beginning in the late 1960s that drove the construction of the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern phenotype as a racial “other.” As a result of American alliances and interests in the Middle East, Arabs were depicted as irrational, characteristically violent, and supportive of oppressive political regimes.

Cainkar is right in pointing out that the racialization of Arabs and Muslims responds to specific political, economical, and social circumstances, but she fails to properly acknowledge that Orientalist and white-supremacist views—while not explicitly Islamophobic—have existed in Western and American societies long before the intervention of the United States in the Middle East. In contrast, Steven Salaita (2006) ties anti-Arab racism to a larger process of white supremacy at the core of the very construction of the United States as a national entity. He argues that “although American racism has always been articulated differently when different groups of individuals are its subjects, it is ultimately [...] a dehumanizing enterprise that in some ways has remained frighteningly consistent throughout American history” by insisting on classifying entire social groups as “evil” (42). Salaita recognizes the relation between anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia, but deems the former more useful to analyze the hatred faced by Arabs and Muslims in the United States today. Although Salaita rightly points to the overarching role that racism plays in Islamophobia, his argument is limited by his misconception of Islamophobia as simply an issue of race/ethnicity.

In American society Islamophobia is a pervasive ideological formation sustained by political discourses and spread through a range of news media narratives and popular culture representations. Nevertheless, the subjects who suffer Islamophobia are not passive receptors. For instance, there are “ways in which Muslim immigrant youth themselves understand, challenge, resist, or rework different notions of cultural citizenship and experiences of belonging and exclusion in relation to transnationalism, multiculturalism, and political dissent” (Maira 2011: 115). American Muslims and Arabs put in practice all the tools previously used by other immigrant groups to seek a place in American society. Stand-up comedy has emerged in the last few years as one of these tools. The public identities of Muslim, Arab, and Middle Eastern stand-up comedians represent an alternative to the abstract identity attributed to them by Islamophobic prejudice. The fact that these comedians embody hyphenated identities—as insider and outsider of American society—challenges the ideological construction of unavoidable conflict between Western and Islamic societies. Islamophobic discourses work through particular kinds of binaries. Because Muslim and Arab American stand-up comedians embody a diverse heritage and ethnic background they—willingly or not—highlight the simplification that lies in such political constructs as American, “other,” “us” and “them.” They comment on ideas of religious and cultural conflict and their diversity contests the racial/ethnic assumptions underlying Islamophobic discourses. When these comedians joke about the terrorist stereotype, they push the audience into acknowledging the ridiculous simplicity of the political discourses that demonize all Arabs and Muslims. In this sense, perhaps the most valuable contribution made by

Arabs, Muslim and Middle Eastern American stand-up comedians is that they are the embodied evidence that the homogenous “we” does not exist. As I discuss in subsequent sections these comedians take the stage to show themselves as both East and West; they appropriate the binary and play with it in front of an audience that is getting progressively broader.

DIMENSIONS OF ARAB AND MUSLIM STAND-UP COMEDY

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 thrust Arab and Muslim Americans into the spotlight and escalated Islamophobic prejudices in the United States. In the aftermath of these events, many Arab and Muslim Americans understood that their well-being in American society partially depended on building better public images of themselves to counter the negative representations of Islam and the Arab world in the media and popular culture. In particular, many Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedians found themselves in a context that was simultaneously a challenge and an opportunity. In her discussion of the stand-up comedian as a culture critic, Stephanie Koziski states that the comedian “may call attention to general features of our cultural landscape by naming the themes that run through the context of American culture like the major ideas of a novel” (1984: 59). Koziski’s statement helps explain the relationship between the increasing success of Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy in the last years and the socio-political context of Islamophobia in post-9/11 American society. Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy is not only about activism, but also about personal narratives of exclusion, and artistic and historical opportunism.

In this section, I discuss these multiple, interconnected dimensions of Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy after 9/11. I draw on two recorded comedy tours, *The Axis of Evil* and *Allah Made Me Funny* and my own experiences as a participant observer at the 8th annual edition of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival in September 2011. The *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*, featuring Middle Eastern-American

comedians Ahmed Ahmed, Aron Kader, Maz Jobrani, and guest comedian Dean Obidallah, premiered in the United States in November 2005. After touring the country and several major cities in the Middle East, it was broadcasted by Comedy Central in 2007. It was released on DVD in late 2007, marking the end of the tour. The beginning of what would become the *Allah Made Me Funny Comedy Tour* is in 2003, when comedian Preacher Moss used the name to brand one of his solo performances. The trio of the tour—Preacher Moss, Azhar Usman and Mo Amer—started performing together in 2006. After touring over thirty countries, they released the *Allah Made Me Funny: Live in Concert* DVD in 2008. In 2011, the three comedians began the *Allah Made Me Funny: World Domination Tour*, with scheduled performances in several countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and United States. In my research, I examine the DVD versions of both shows and the data I collected at the 8th New York Arab American Comedy Festival. This festival featured more than forty comedians of Arab heritage, divided in five nights of performances, including not only stand-up but also sketch comedy. I use additional data such as websites, public interviews of the comedians, YouTube videos, and documentaries, to contextualize and support my discussion.

Comedians in both *The Axis of Evil* and *Allah Made Me Funny* tours, as well as those who performed at the Festival, engage some of the most recurring stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims escalating in post-9/11 American political discourse and media. Some themes run through all these performances. Some of the most common ones are airport profiling and air traveling, Arab and Muslim alleged anger, terrorism,

religious fanaticism, suicide bombing, etc. Additionally, the comedians deal with the differences between their ethnic and religious groups' cultural habits and those of a perceived hegemony of white Christian America.

It is difficult to estimate the total number of spectators reached by the recorded performances that I examine and the ethnic/religious composition of that audience. However, available data suggests that both *The Axis of Evil* and *Allah Made Me Funny* have reached an audience much larger than that of the Arab American Comedy Festival in any of its annual editions. Not only have they toured numerous theater venues, but also the recorded versions of the tours are likely to have spread to thousands of spectators. *Allah Made Me Funny: Live in Concert* was filmed at Heritage Forum in Anaheim, California—according to the DVD final credits. The Anaheim Forum has a capacity of 2500 spectators. *The Axis of Evil* was filmed at the OC Pavilion Performing Arts Theater in Santa Ana, California, which has a capacity of 500 spectators (Lee 2007). In both cases the images of the audience show that the theaters were full with an ethnically mixed audience. In the *Allah Made Me Funny* case, a majority of spectators seem to be Muslim, judging by the covered heads of the female members. In addition, *Allah Made Me Funny: Live in Concert* was released in 14 movie theaters and ran for 2 weeks, reaching a box office of almost \$70,000 seven times the production expenses (IMDb). Beside the DVD sales, of which I have no data, excerpts of both recorded performances are available on YouTube and other online servers. Because they offer mere excerpts, they make it difficult to calculate the total number of the audience.

On the contrary, the numbers and composition of the 8th New York Arab American Comedy Festival audience is easier to establish. The Gotham Comedy Club, which has a capacity of approximately 200 seats, was full each of the five nights of the Festival. Although some members of the audience like myself belonged to other ethnic groups than Arab or Middle Eastern, we were a minority. The presence of other ethnicities in the audience might be due to the fact that Gotham usually features comedians from diverse ethnic groups. Presumably, habitual attendees of those other performances come to the Festival too. However, the majority of the audience was Muslim, Arab, and Middle Eastern American. When comedians asked how many, Arabs, Muslims or people from the Middle East were in the club, the affirmative reactions of the audience confirmed this ethnic composition.

The comedians that I address come from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. Among those of *The Axis of Evil*, Dean Obidallah, born in New Jersey of a Sicilian Catholic mother and a Palestinian Muslim father, is also co-founder of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival. Obidallah was raised mostly Christian but his father exposed him to Islam as a child¹. Aron Kader's father is Palestinian while his mother is Mormon. Although I have no definitive evidence of it, his joke that growing up among Muslims and Mormons is a "one way ticket to being an atheist comedian" suggests that Kader currently does not hold any religious beliefs (*Aron Kader at*

¹ In *The Axis of Evil* he mentions that as a child his father would give him one dollar bills to learn excerpts from the Quran. This indicates that he might have had a more cultural than religious relationship with Islam or, at least, that whereas his learning about Islam was mostly provided by his father in a domestic, intimate way at home he was invested in the Christian faith in more formal ways, such as church attendance.

ANERA 2008). Maz Jobrani is Iranian and was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Ahmed Ahmed was born in Egypt but also grew up in California. Both Jobrani and Ahmed mention in *The Axis of Evil* that they grew up Muslim, but they do not indicate whether or not they are practicing followers of Islam.

The comedians in *The Axis of Evil* self-identify as Arab (except Jobrani) and Middle Eastern, but not as Muslim. The comedians in *Allah Made Me Funny*, however, speak from a condition of practicing Muslims, and make references to it in the show. For instance, Preacher Moss' act includes a story about his Christian family's reluctance to accept his conversion to Islam. He recalls that his mother convinced him to go to church after his conversion to try and bring him back to the Christian faith.

I walked into the church and everybody knew I was Muslim, even the old ladies. I was like 'Hey, Mrs. Johnson!' and she was like [making a feminine voice] 'Hi, Satan!' [To the audience] You know is bad when you walk through and a whole choir is singing about you! [Singing and clapping like in black gospel music] 'Jesus help this fool 'cause his going to hell! Jesus help this fool 'cause his going to hell! [In high pitch, like a background singer] Heeeeeell! [Back to the previous pitch] Jesus help this fool 'cause his going tooooooooooo hell...' (*Allah Made Me Funny* 2008)

Also in the same tour, Azhar Usman always begins his performances with the Muslim greeting "As-Salamu Aleykum;" and Mo Amer is shown in the DVD at home taking time off his joke writing to pray. Even the name of the show, *Allah Made Me Funny*, conveys the important place of religion in Usman, Amer and Moss' work and public personae. Moreover, religion is what brings them together, because while all the comedians in *The Axis of Evil* are of Middle Eastern heritage, Usman, Moss, and Amer are of different ethnicities/nationalities—Indian, African-American, and Palestinian, respectively. Furthermore, their stand-up acts deal with specific issues affecting

Muslims, such as religious celebrations, fasting, alcohol and pork consumption, and their relationships with the women in their family.

Stand-up Comedy as Political Activism

The political comments in Muslim and Arab American stand-up comedy express concerns, shared among performers and audiences, about specific domestic and international decisions of the Bush administration after 9/11. Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern comedians have indicated in numerous interviews and public statements after 9/11 that they felt compelled to speak out and present viewpoints of themselves and their communities that are alternative to those available in mainstream media. Maysoon Zayid, a Palestinian American who founded the Arab American Comedy Festival with Dean Obidallah in 2003, reflects on this by saying, “we are talking to white Americans, we are saying ‘this is what is like to be Arab post 9/11 in the United States’” (*America at a Crossroads* 2007). It is significant that Zayid uses the plural “we.” The need to articulate a community of Middle Eastern writers, directors, and actors has been one of the goals of The Arab American Comedy Festival since its beginnings. Moreover, all the comedians of *The Axis of Evil* have regularly performed in the festival, which also takes Middle Eastern American comedians to perform in the Middle East and brings Arab comedians from abroad. Obidallah summarizes this push to create a sense of community by saying that “the idea of using [the Middle Eastern comedians’] craft as a way of activism is a thread that unites all of us” (*America at a Crossroads* 2007).

As part of their activist agenda, Arab and Muslim comedians struggle to offer positive images of their communities. In *Allah Made Me Funny*, both Moss and Usman allude to this need to construct a better image for the contemporary American “other” and point to the active role that Muslims and Arabs have to play in this change. In Usman’s words, “we gotta do a better job in explaining ourselves. Do you ever think about how ridiculous you sound when you go to your boss to ask for a day off for Eid but you don't know which day it is?” Similarly, Moss reminds his audience that the information available on TV about Muslims is rarely self-created.

Muslims don’t advertise, at all! [...] Three in the morning I wanna see this guy jump up on my TV: [In an assertive voice] ‘Are you tired of eating pork?’ [Pauses for a couple of seconds, the audience bursts in laughs] ‘Are you sick of drinking alcohol? You only got one wife? Whaaaaaaaaaat?’ [Referring to the audience] Look at the brothers! [Expresses satisfaction, mimicking the reactions of the male audience] Look at the sisters! [Makes a face of anger and disapproval, mimicking the female audience] [...] I’ve heard about the 4 wives thing... I CAN BARELY HANDLE THE ONE I GOT!” (*Allah Made Me Funny* 2008).

Although Moss initially refers to polygamy as a characteristic of the Muslim identity, his shift to show the female audience's supposed outrage, and his statement that he has one wife, counters the stereotype. His reference to the fact that Muslims “don’t advertise” allows reflexivity for his Arab and Muslim audiences and reminds them of the need to do a better job in explaining themselves, to paraphrase Usman.

Besides the effort to counter negative representations, the political comments of Arab and Muslim comedy address some of the issues resulting from the scapegoating of the American “other” after 9/11. In *The Axis of Evil*, Obidallah addresses the—then new—restriction of carrying liquids through airport security. He ties this theme with the effects that the increase of security measures has on the profiling of Middle Eastern

people: “I think more people would rather fly with snakes on the plane than Middle Eastern people at this point. But to keeps us safe we got a thing called the Patriot Act. [Ironical smile] Remember when we had a thing called freedoms at some point?” (2007). In this excerpt he positions the Patriot Act in opposition to “freedoms,” implying that it has taken away former rights that were once taken for granted.

Muslim and Arab comedians often point to the taken-for-granted status of the most recurring Islamophobic stereotypes. In his act, Usman addresses the extent to which the fear of Muslims has become a matter of common sense in American society:

I don't even blame people anymore, men, I don't even think they're racist or prejudiced, they just... they can't help it! They just see someone who looks like me walking on the street and they're hear a little voice in their head like [whispering in a frightening tone and pauses in between the words to create an escalation] “Osama, Taliban, Sadam... Obama!” [Shifting to his voice an expressing skepticism] Obama? Where did that come from, man? What's Obama got to do with this? (*Allah Made Me Funny* 2008)

Both “they can't help it” and the “little voice in the head” reflects the nature of Islamophobic prejudices as discursive formations that become naturalized. In *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*, Michael Pickering indicates that, “stereotypes relate to conceptions of what is held to be ‘natural’ or ‘normal’” (2001: xiv). Pickering also examines the relationship between stereotypes and processes of “othering.” He suggests that it is through stereotypes that those holding a power position push other groups into the margins of society, thus “othering” them, denying them the “normal” condition.

By mentioning Obama, Usman refers to the polemics that originated at the far right of the political spectrum when Barack Obama started to look like the winner of the

Presidential election of 2008. Some of Obama's political rivals accused him of being a "secret Muslim," capitalizing on existing Islamophobic prejudices existing in American society (Stonebanks 2009). Usman's allusion equates those holding Islamophobic prejudices with those most invested in Obama's defeat and therefore, acts as a political statement. Furthermore, by voicing the thoughts of the people who hold these stereotypes he constructs their beliefs as a Manichean divide in which all the "others" look alike. In these beliefs black identity gets confused with Muslim identity; and Talibans, who are Islamic fundamentalists, get confused with Saddam Houssein, whose regime in Iraq was based on laicism and socialism. Usman underlines that beliefs regarding the "others" in American society are not only exclusionary, but also based on gross generalizations.

Usman's comic persona relies on the dialogical relationship between what Muslim Americans are and how they are perceived. "I'm perfectly aware that most of you have never seen someone who looks like me smile before" (*Allah Made Me Funny* 2008), he says at the very beginning of his act. With this statement Usman addresses the fact that in mainstream media representations, people "who look like him," rarely seem to be in a relaxed, happy mood. On the contrary, Islamophobic stereotypes take exterior appearance as the marker of an evil interior, as "behavior, the body, and dress are treated not as cultural markers but as a kind of moral index" (Morey and Yaquin 2011: 3). Usman further highlights this when he comments on his own appearance to his audience: "if I was [voicing a frightening whisper and accelerating the speed of his speech] a-crazy-Muslim-fundamentalist-terrorist-about-to-hijack-the-plane, [back to his voice and

adopting a serious tone] this is probably not the disguise I'd go with" (*Allah Made Me Funny* 2008). Here, he alludes to the threat presumably posed by his appearance.

Immediately after the allusion he empties the normally-represented-as-frightening physical image from its danger by asserting that he is, indeed, able to smile. When he says that, "this is not the disguise I would go with" his tone conveys common sense. Because he looks like the stereotypical terrorist but he is not one, he invites the audience to consider that there are many people who look like him and but are not terrorists.

In the same vein, *The Axis of Evil* begins with a skit that mocks Orientalist representations of a Middle Eastern "other." In this skit, Kader, Obidallah, Ahmed, and Jobrani are smoking a hookah in a setting filled with many elements that Western culture associates with the Arab world. There is a background music that suggests Oriental sensuality as the four comedians are sitting on a Persian rug. The lighting is smooth with red tones. Obidallah and Kader have their heads covered with the traditional Palestinian scarf. The comedy of the situation is provided by a discussion between Kader and Obidallah, on one hand, and Ahmed and Jobrani, on the other. The former two want to wear their scarfs during the show, but Ahmed and Jobrani refuse to let them. To decide what is appropriate, the four comedians play the children's game Rock-Paper-Scissors but replace its words with Middle Eastern foods such as "humus" and "babaganush."

This scene, with its bold exaggeration of Oriental elements, such as the Persian rug and the names of traditional Middle Eastern food, conveys the oversimplified image that mainstream America has of the Middle-Eastern "other." The position of this opening scene suggests that it is a framing device, a declaration that this is going to be a show

that plays with and challenges ethnic and religious stereotypes. By covering their heads with the Palestinian scarf, both Kader and Obidallah, who are half Christian and look white, align themselves with the troublesome half of their identity and subtly claim their right to talk on behalf of Middle Eastern Americans. They re-appropriate an image common in media representations of Arabs, but empty the image from its violent and angry connotations. When they solve their conflict in a childlike way, by playing Rock-Paper-Scissors, they present an antithesis of the violence that Islamophobic stereotypes writes on the bodies of Arabs and Muslims.

Stand-up Comedy as Historical Opportunity

Obidallah's joke "I go to bed September 10 white... I woke up September 11th... I'm an Arab!" beautifully conveys what post 9/11 United States has to offer to Muslim and Arab American comedians: both the uneasiness of Islamophobia and the comedic opportunity to address specific historical and political circumstances that shape Islamophobia in the United States (*The Axis of Evil* 2007). The political rhetoric about Islam during the Bush Administration made Arab and Muslim identity a hot topic, and prepared the scene for Muslim and Arab comedians to talk about some of the issues that had, at that time, caught the attention of a great part of American society.

The name *The Axis of Evil* refers to an expression first used by George W. Bush in a 2002 State of the Union Address to describe countries that allegedly represented a menace to the United States security—Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Bush said:

Our second goal is to prevent regimes that sponsor terrorism from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. Some of

these regimes have been pretty quiet since September 11. But we know their true nature. [...] States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. (“Text of President Bush” 2002)

Bush’s statements quickly became notorious worldwide. The fact that by 2005, however, “the axis of evil” was the brand name of a comedy show indicates that by then it had, on one hand, a mainstream recognition and, on the other hand, lost political credibility on a national level. The choice of this name not only suggests an intention to parody the president's overzealousness at using “the axis of evil” to advance a specific international political agenda, but also indicates a relationship between the show’s marketability and the decline of public support for George W. Bush’s during his second term of office. While at the beginning of 2002, when Bush coined the expression, his approval rating was near 90%, by 2005, when the show was created, it had dropped to a half (Jones 2008).

By branding the show *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* its creators invited audiences to recognize the kind of political critique that they were likely to find in it. They also suggested the ideological position of the comedians, who—by playful association with “the evil”—self-identified as America’s new “public enemy” after 9/11. The name provided a frame for the comedians to expose the fact that Islamophobic prejudices were negatively affecting the everyday lives of Arab, Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans who had unfairly become the scapegoats of 9/11. That the name of the show was purposefully chosen as a political critique is evident during Ahmed’s performance, in which he jokes that they are still looking to include a comedian from North Korea in the tour. Parody employs irony to make possible a critical distance

between the parody and the phenomenon that it targets (Hutcheon 1985). In this sense, the comedians' performances parody, and thus bring under critical scrutiny, the rhetoric of constant imminent danger advanced by the Bush administration.

The comedians' playful allegiance with "the evil" is essential in the kind of humor that *The Axis of Evil* features. Since its beginning, the show has played with the comedians' self-identification as the "other" of post 9/11 American society, both in terms of staging elements and the textual content of the jokes. For instance, the yellow and black symbols of radioactive material decorating the stage convey a sense of danger, which in this context alludes to and parodies the mass destruction arsenal allegedly possessed by the nations of Bush's "axis of evil." To enter the stage the comedians must pass through a metal detector similar to those existing in airports. When an actress playing the role of a security guard asks Obidallah what his name means he hesitantly answers "Peaceful, friendly Arab?" with a tone that makes clear to the audience that he is lying. In fact, later in his performance he reveals that Obidallah means "servant of Allah." The security guard also tries to make sexual advances on Ahmed and later, takes out some latex gloves to perform a "cavity search" on Jobrani, who is forced to bribe her with money to avoid the uncomfortable moment. Kader activates the detector, but takes advantage of the fact that the security guard is distracted, talking on the phone, to pass through. In this way, the show humorously plays with the comedians' condition as terror suspects, but gains the audience's empathy for them. From the beginning, the show invites the audience to identify with the problems that Arab and Muslim Americans face

in mundane activities such as air traveling, and to sympathize with their diverse responses of astonishment, outrage and cynicism.

When Obidallah begins his individual comedic routine he refers to the surveillance policies targeting Arab and Muslim Americans after 9/11: “We wanna thank everyone who’s come out to support us: the Iranians, slash Persians, Arabs, White people, FBI, ATF, Homeland Security... The cameras are for [making the gesture of quotation marks] Comedy Central.” In *Allah Made Me Funny*, Preacher Moss makes a similar reference. He tells the audience they are being “filmed by the production company [and] recorded by the FBI”. In this way, the comedians’ self-identification as terror suspects, presented at the beginning, continues throughout the whole performance.

As for George W. Bush, *The Axis of Evil* mocks his decreasing popular support and his inadequacies as President and politician. Obidallah reminds the audience during his routine that “herpes has a higher approval rating right now than President Bush” and Jobrani states that every time he sees Bush on TV he thinks that Americans are targets of a joke. *Allah Made Me Funny* takes similar comedic shots at Bush. Usman picks fun at Bush's mispronunciation of the word “terrorist” as if it was “terrace” and insinuates that the president has a limited vocabulary, as “SAT words” are too “big” for him. Targets might be “constructed as identities who are significantly discursively incompetent, and whose ineptness distinguishes them from us, reinforcing our own identity as fully subjected, ‘law-abiding’ masters of discourse” (Purdie 1993: 59). This depiction of George W. Bush as anti-intellectual is common in Muslim and Arab stand-up comedy. However, it is not simply a direct retaliation at Bush. Rather, it uses the president’s

persona to stand-in for particular political discourses demonizing Arabs and Muslims. George W. Bush is the most frequently cited political figure in both shows not because he was the only one to make gross generalizations about the Islamic world and the “evil” it represents, but because he was, during his time in the White House, the most visible image of top-down Islamophobic American politics. By addressing Bush, Muslim and Arab comedians project the historical relevance of their humor: one directly related to the American political speeches that audiences also see on television on a daily basis.

Perhaps the sharpest of such direct critiques in both shows is the impression that Kader makes of the—then—president in *The Axis of Evil*. This impression mocks Bush’s way of deflecting unpleasant or polemic questions in press conferences and his alleged prejudices towards Middle Eastern people to whom Kader, mimicking Bush, refers as “brown sand people” and “motherfuckers.” Kader reflects: “if Bush just came out and called everybody in the Middle East a motherfucker, don’t you think half of America, maybe more than half, would go... [thick rural Southern accent] ‘I like that, right there. That’s honest!’” (2007). Kader’s mimicry is an example of how, in jokes, butts “are precisely degraded from the power to construct and define *us*, within their language-making” (Purdie 1993: 59; emphasis original). Thus, Kader degrades Bush from his power to define Middle Eastern people. Moreover, the thick Southern accent alludes to a demographic within American society that is likely to hold stronger prejudices against Arab and Muslims (CAIR 2006, 2007). By ascribing the belief that Middle Eastern people are “motherfuckers” to an abstract ignorant hillbilly type, Kader invites the audience to consider that holding such prejudices towards Middle Eastern people is an

uninformed position. In this, Kader positions himself and the audience above those who are ignorant enough to buy into the idea that not only are all the people in the Middle East the same, but are also all inherently evil.

Like *The Axis of Evil* and *Allah Made Me Funny*, the New York Arab American Comedy Festival strives to reflect contemporary events affecting Arabs and/or Arab countries in each annual edition. The 8th edition had the title “The Comedy Revolution,” a reference to the Arab Spring, a series of popular uprisings pushing for democratic reforms that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread in 2011 to other Arab countries such as Egypt, Libya, and Syria (Blight, Pulham, and Torpey 2011). In addition, several of the comedians at the Festival introduced references to these events in their performances. Obidallah, asked the audience how many Libyans were in the house, and then joked: “Do you know where Gadaffi is?” Kader mentioned that Gadaffi looks “like a child molester” and elicited audience applause by mentioning that it would have been nice for Israel to send some food or humanitarian support to Libya during the revolution: “Israelis, act like Christians, just for once...” This is not the only edition of the Festival to make a link with broader politico-historical events going on at the time. In 2009, the festival was called “Yes Arabs Can” in reference to Barack Obama’s electoral campaign. In fact, the posters of the Festival were in colors inspired by Obama’s red and blue posters, but instead of the president’s image they featured that of a smiling camel.

Stand-up Comedy as Personal Narrative

Muslim and Arab stand-up comedy has the characteristics of personal narrative

performance. “Personal narratives are contextualized by, reflect on, and explore the individual’s place in collective events and historical time. They evoke many additional narratives with their own distinct temporalities beyond the individual life” (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008: 43). As the comedians voice their experiences as America’s “other” after 9/11, they present an alternative narrative about the groups they represent than that available in mainstream media representations and political discourses. They tell these alternative narratives from their viewpoints, and they enclose in their speech emotions that their experiences elicited. In this way, their personal narratives make reference to the socio-historical time and place in which they are created. At the same time the narratives are always embedded in and make reference to broader power relations existing in society.

In *The Axis of Evil*, Ahmed talks about the expectations that casting directors had when they auditioned him to play the part of terrorist in a movie. He reveals that they asked him to “show us more of that anger that your people possesses.” This revelation in Ahmed’s narrative places him in a power relationship with people whose expectations of him correspond with their stereotypes about his ethnic/religious heritage. Yet, he uses irony to posit himself above his interlocutors, suggesting to the audience that he acknowledged the silliness of the angry Arab stereotype but accepted the part for economic reasons. Consequently, in this personal narrative, Ahmed subverts his subsequent power position by taking advantage of it, acting as a trickster, who employs tropes of adaptation and survival located in subtle practices much more than direct confrontation (Deandrea 2004).

Ahmed's personal anecdote also exposes a fact I have already addressed: the complicity of the film industry in portraying Arabs as terrorists. But it is Jobrani who, later on, focuses on how media influence naturalizes the image of Iranians as essentially angry people:

When I see us on TV now... who do they always show? They always show the crazy dude burning an American flag, going [in an angry voice and Middle Eastern accent] "Death to America!" [With despair] Always that guy! JUST ONCE I wish they'd show us doing something good, right? Like baking a cookie or something. I've been to Iran. We have cookies! [...] "Hello, I'm Mohamed and I'm just baking a cookie. I swear to God. No bombs, no flags, nothing." (*The Axis of Evil* 2007)

Jobrani expresses his frustration with an incongruous relation between his lived experience in Iran and the representation of Iran he sees on television. Similarly, Obidallah in his performance, takes a notebook out of his pocket, and reads to the audience some of the remarks people have made after hearing that he is Arab, and then comments on some of them:

"Oh, you're Arab? Why are you people so angry all the time?" Caffeine? I don't know what to tell you... "Oh, you're Arab? But you look so nice." [Pauses and laughs] This one makes little sense but I've heard this several times "Oh, you're Arab? What a coincidence! I love Indian food." (*The Axis of Evil* 2007)

Like Jobrani, Obidallah calls attention to the distance between his lived experience and representations that are assigned to him in social interactions. The comic effect in both cases lies precisely in the distance between the constructed image and the lived experience.

Personal narratives may claim to represent an underprivileged position. Lynn C. Miller and Jacqueline Taylor, however, draw attention to the fact that, "by virtue of claiming one's life in public, the performer claims that his or her life is worthy of

attention, [which] makes autobiographical performance both an ideal genre for redistributing power and a locus for continued struggles with the inequitable distribution of power” (2006: 178). Following Miller and Taylor, this kind of stand-up comedy, while making public and calling attention to the personal experiences of exclusion of Arab and Muslim Americans, is a contested site of power relations. In this contested site, the comedians inhabit a dual position of victims of Islamophobic stereotypes and subjects who have the privilege of taking a stage to make their stories known.

Arab and Muslim comedians’ self-identification with the “other,” because it happens in the frame of a staged performance, can be a source of pleasure. This identification, while arguably coexisting with a genuine desire to speak out after 9/11, is also a privileged venue available to these comedians for venting some of the unpleasant experiences affecting them as Arab and/or Muslim Americans in recent years. In this sense, the stage can offer a safe space in which embodying one’s “otherness,” possessing some of the characteristics that define the new America’s public enemy, brings about mainly positive consequences and frames the “other” as an object of public admiration. Furthermore, by making public some concerns that affect them and other Arab and Muslim Americans, they create a venue for collective relief. In this way, stand-up comedy creates a “reversion of reality [that] can result in a healing catharsis” (Koziski 1984: 70). In Muslim and Arab American stand-up comedy this healing process is both personal and collective.

As participant observer at the 8th Arab American Comedy Festival, I had the opportunity to experience the collective celebration present in the Festival. Every night,

while waiting to get my ticket, or my seat at a table to see the show, I overheard conversations among people who stated they had come to the festival before, sometimes at several of its annual editions. Before and after the show, comedians could be seen outside the club, smoking, talking on the phone, or looking for a familiar face. There, audience members offered them sympathy and congratulations for the performance. For the most part, the audience seemed to leave the shows greatly satisfied, exiting the club in groups and chatting about this or that joke or comedian.

In my experience, the audience at the Festival knows very well the kind of performance to which they are going and have a positive disposition toward the comedians and the event. It is undeniable that one of the Festival most visible consequences is the opportunity it offers to Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern audiences and performers an opportunity to come together and poke fun at some of the stereotypes about their ethnic and religious groups; celebrate a sense of community; and come together to have fun. Dean Obidallah has explained that when they “first started the festival in 2003, it was much more about activism, now it’s becoming mainstream” (Salama 2008). Part of this increasing popularity comes from the fact that some of the Festival’s regular performers’ participation in *The Axis of Evil* has made them better known in the business, thus attracting a broader audience.

Stand-up Comedy as Artistic Opportunity

Mucahit Bilici states that American Muslim stand-up comedians “are perhaps the only beneficiaries of the negative charisma associated with being Muslim” currently

existing in the United States (2010: 197). He points to the paradox that it is precisely Islamophobia that drives audiences' interest towards Muslim stand-up comedy.

Islamophobia is indeed essential to understand the growth of the genre and the success of *The Axis of Evil* and *Allah Made Me Funny* tours. I think, however, that Bilici's reading of the phenomena is simplistic. Certainly, both the tours and the Arab American Comedy Festival would either be very different or not exist at all if Islamophobia were not a real problem in post-9/11 American society. Nevertheless, the fact that the American socio-political context provides a certain professional/artistic benefit for these comedians does not mean that they are any less invested in challenging Islamophobic stereotypes or explaining to mainstream America that Arab and Muslim identities are not as threatening as they are usually portrayed. In fact, the relationship between the ethnic and religious characteristics that makes these comedians simultaneously potential "others" in society and celebrated public figures is a fraught one.

Usman's corpulent figure, brown skin, and long black beard is probably very inconvenient when dealing with airport security staff, but makes for a great source of jokes in his comedy. Tropes relating to security issues, airport traveling, and the profiling of Arabs and Muslims hold a major position in both *The Axis of Evil* and *Allah Made Me Funny*, but very particularly in Usman's act, in which he declares that when he enters an airport all heads turn on him. When he boards his plane, according to Usman, people suddenly look afraid, think "Oh, my God, I'm going to die!" and then call their relatives to say "good-bye." For Usman, his imposing physical appearance—his erroneous profiling as an "other"—is indispensable to his humor, comedic persona, and

success as a comedian. His looking *like* a terrorist provides an artistic opportunity to be on stage, and consequently he exaggerates this identification.

There is no denial of the fact that for many—or maybe all—of these comedians the post-9/11 political situation in the United States means an opportunity to thrive professionally. This is due to the anxieties and fascination of the American audiences with the Muslim identity after 9/11, which has opened a market for their kind of stand-up comedy. For some of them, doing stand-up is a means to overcome the limited range of casting opportunities for Arab and Middle Eastern actors available on TV and films. We can see in the example of Ahmed’s frustration with being offered “terrorist” roles how stand-up comedy might offer a means to exceed the limitations of the job market for Middle Eastern actors whose heritage is physically *visible*. Nonetheless, these limitations can also work in the opposite direction. Ahmed recognizes this about himself: “when I go up on stage, the first joke that comes out of my mouth, if it doesn’t have anything to do with my name or my heritage or my religion, people aren’t as interested” (*America at a Crossroads* 2007). Simultaneously, Ahmed addresses the fact that audiences might as well have expectations that Arab and Muslim comedians will deal in their acts with ethnic/religious topics, which might be a limitation in its own way.

Many Muslim and Arab stand-up comedians have found that after 9/11 the market has opened for them in a way unavailable before. Maysoon Zayid is a particularly good example of this. As a classically trained actress of Palestinian descent who has cerebral palsy, Zayid faces not only the difficulty of limited roles for Middle Eastern actors but also the limitation of roles for actors with disability. As co-founder of

the Arab American Comedy Festival, Maysoon has found an opportunity to break into the business and overcome her limited possibilities to get acting jobs. For Preacher Moss talking about being Muslim has also opened a market niche with far less competition than that of African-American stand-up comedy, to which he had dedicated himself before 9/11. Joe Derosa, who has performed in several editions of the Festival, rarely self-identifies as an Arab outside this venue. In fact, his opportune exploitation of his Arab heritage to perform at the Festival has been mocked in a sketch called “An Arab of Convenience,” performed during the 2009 edition and featuring Derosa, Zayid and Obidallah.

Normative Communities of Humor and the Reach of Stand-up Comedy

So far, I have discussed Muslim and Arab American stand-up comedy as a complex phenomenon that takes place at the intersection of political activism, personal narrative, and artistic and historical opportunity. Through its multiple dimensions, this kind of stand-up comedy challenges Islamophobic stereotypes and offers a venue for Muslim and Arab American comedians to construct alternative representations of their ethnic and religious groups than those usually available on mainstream media and in American political discourses after 9/11. In instances such as Kader’s reference to the Americans who would gladly accept their president’s statement that all Middle Eastern people are “motherfuckers,” the comedians “relate associations and language by matching distinct social class representatives with dialects” (Koziski 1984: 67). This allows them to construct the profile of the potential Islamophobes within American

society and position themselves and their audience in a superior position to that demographic. By doing so, the comedians seem—perhaps inadvertently—to challenge the stereotypes affecting Middle Eastern people by reinforcing the stereotypes about rural white America and its supposed lack of critical thinking. Two reflections about this process are pertinent. First, such generalizations point to one of the limits of stand-up comedy and humor in general, which by “minimizing information overload as the comedians sets the scene for laughs” (Koziski 1984: 67) can in fact offer what Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering (2008) call “a license to offend.” Second, such constructions of the supposedly Islamophobe Americans allows us a conjecture about the ideological position that *The Axis of Evil* audience—and the audience of Arab and Muslim stand-up comedy in general—has. I argue that this ideological position is shared by the comedians and the spectators to form what Giseline Kuipers (2006) defines as “normative communities of humor,” that is, social groups who agree upon a given set of rules dealing with what topics to make jokes of and in which circumstances to do so.

During my attendance as participant observer in the 2011 edition of the Arab American Comedy Festival I found further reasons to believe that generally this kind of comedy brings together a mostly urban audience with a politically progressive ideology. On its last evening, the festival organizers notified the audience that there was going to be a surprise. The surprise consisted of a comedy sketch featuring comedians Bethel Caram and Neil Potter in the roles of 2012 Republican presidential aspirants Michelle Bachman and Rick Perry. In approximately ten minutes, both actors did a very sharp impression of the two political figures, which included Bachman stating that “being

around all this Arabs makes me nervous” and Perry praying out loud “please God, don’t let these people kill us tonight, ‘cause I’ve only brought eight bullets in my revolver.” The sketch ended with a sort of duel between both characters, who challenged each other to a “praying contest” to see who could pray faster and louder.

The Perry and Bachman sketch forms part of the larger tendency of Arab and Muslim stand-up comedy to comment on conservative political figures associated with Islamophobic prejudices, as Mo Amer does in his act in *Allah Made Me Funny* joking about Dick Cheney coming out of a Walmart aisle to target him with a gun but eventually shooting the cashier by mistake. These rather direct political parodies construct a temporary community with the audience. Susan Purdie indicates that a discursive relationship is “formed collusively between the joke’s Teller and its Audience (of one or more) which depends upon and creates their object’s exclusion. This generates a delicious intimacy, which is pleasurable and powerful in itself” (1993: 5). Judging by the reactions of the spectators at the festival to the Perry and Bachman sketch most people in the audience are unlikely to take both candidates as serious representatives of the Republican Party, much less suitable potential presidents of the United States. In the same vein, I speculate that the voters who do think about Perry and Bachman as suitable candidates are not likely to be found in a comedy club in Chelsea, NYC, attending an Arab comedy festival. The broad implication of this is the question of reach for Arab and Muslim stand-up comedy as a counter Islamophobic discourse. How likely are these comedians to change the minds of Islamophobe Americans if most of their audience is formed of people who do not hold Islamophobic prejudices in the first place? Despite the

comedians' statements that their work is political activism, are they merely "preaching to the choir"?

The discussion regarding the effects of humor and popular culture on prejudices is one that does not seem to have a simple response. Neil Vidmar (1974) argued in the 1970s that Americans' overwhelmingly positive response to Archie Bunker, the bigot character in the television sitcom *All in the Family*, depended on the spectators' previous ideological position. Those who disagreed with Archie's prejudices found the character funny as the butt of the show's humor. They were inclined to think that the show exposed bigots as deplorable fools to laugh at. On the contrary, those spectators holding racial prejudices laughed *with* Archie and not *at* him, as they found acceptable and shared his political and social opinions.

Vidmar's findings elicit some questions about the reach of Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy. It has indeed a dimension of political activism that challenges Islamophobic stereotypes existing in American society post-9/11 and attempts to construct more positive images of Arabs and Muslims. The extent to which it can actually change Islamophobic prejudices, however, is difficult to pin down. Muslim and Arab American stand-up comedy is a multilayered complex phenomenon. Located across political activism, personal narrative, and historical and artistic opportunity, this kind of comedy has grown and evolved since its beginnings after 9/11 and will presumably continue to change in order to reflect and comment upon the issues troubling Arab and Muslim Americans and their struggles to overcome their condition as the current America's "others."

STAND-UP COMEDY, IDENTITY, AND NATIONAL BELONGING

Azhar Usman often repeats the joke that, when he is in the United States, people hate him for being Muslim, but when he travels abroad he is thrilled to find out that he is hated just for being American. Usman's witticism reflects a duality that many Arab and Muslim Americans have felt since 9/11 and does so from a critical perspective that alludes to some of the possible outcomes of that duality. One of those outcomes is rootlessness: the tragic condition that Mucahit Bilici indicates is that of belonging "to both worlds and neither" (2010: 196). Usman implies that, as a Muslim, American society precludes him from any possibility of complete belonging. Moreover, his reference to the thrill he feels when people abroad consider him American, even when that consideration comes with hate, is an ironic comment on the high price Muslim and Arab Americans have to pay for that belonging. But most importantly, Usman's joke is an indication of the prominent place that hyphenated identities have in the work of Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedians. In this section, I examine the ways in which Arab and Muslim comedians navigate the different poles of their hyphenated identity in their performances in order to legitimate their play with ethnic and religious stereotypes. I also discuss how these comedians consciously situate themselves and their humor in a longstanding tradition: the use of stand-up comedy by ethnic groups to assimilate into and negotiate positive recognition from American society.

The Comedian as “Other”

Arab and Muslim stand-up comedians’ self-identification as the “other” of post-9/11 American society is an essential element of their humor. By adopting the identity of the “other” they obtain the necessary legitimacy to engage with Islamophobic stereotypes. That is, by highlighting their Arab, Muslim, or Middle Eastern identity they are able to make fun of delicate topics from an insider position, which dispels any potential accusations of bigotry. Elaine W. Chun (2004) describes the legitimization of racial humor in relationship to the perceived membership of the speaker in the community he is mocking and the interpretative framework in which he speaks. This is evident when Jobrani states in *The Axis of Evil* that if a Middle Easterner were to use anthrax¹ he would probably wrap it around himself and run into people. Jobrani makes a clear reference to suicide bombing, which is a delicate topic to joke about, yet makes it permissible because he self-identifies on stage as Middle Eastern. Thus, by performing as an “other,” Jobrani is able to mock assumptions affecting the “others,” located at the margins of mainstream American society.

The comedians’ co-articulation of comedy and marginality is a deliberate self-positioning against Islamophobic stereotypes and a way of inviting audiences to empathize with their position and look critically at those stereotypes. On the other hand, it is also an underlying characteristic of any comedian’s stage persona. In *Performing Marginality*, Joanne R. Gilbert considers that all stand-up comedians present and play

¹ Jobrani refers to the events in late September 2001, when several media offices and politicians received mail containing anthrax. The United States Government initially considered Al Qaeda responsible for the anthrax mailing. Further investigations, however, pointed to an Army biodefense expert.

with a marginalized persona in order to engage in cultural, social or political critique from a certain distance (2004: xvi). This adopted perspective from the margins allows the comedian to address his critique to society while remaining in the position of the fool, who may or may not be taken seriously by the audience. According to Gilbert, marginalized individuals are afforded a freedom unique to their possibility of shifting between the insider and outsider's positions (7-24).

Among the comedians I examine, however, this self-identification with the outsider position works differently depending on the prominence of the physical features that identify them as Arabs or Muslims. Recall Azhar Usman's remark about the audience not having seen someone like him smile before. Because Usman embodies some of the features ascribed to the "other" by Islamophobic stereotypes, he does not need to explain on stage why he is entitled to perform his act. This is not the case, however, with comedians who are not readily perceived as Arabs or Muslims. For instance, during Dean Obidallah's appearance in *The Axis of Evil*, he underlines his Palestinian identity and downplays his white identity. He is introduced with the sentence "From Eastern Palestine, Dean Obidallah." Later in the show we understand the real meaning of this introduction when he says: "I'm from Eastern Palestine, also known as New Jersey." Of course, if he were introduced as purely "from New Jersey" it would immediately raise questions about his place in "the axis of evil" and, consequently, his legitimacy to perform as Arab and deal with the stereotypical images affecting this group.

Physically, Obidallah's Arab heritage is hardly identifiable. In fact, at the beginning of his appearance in the show this is used to comic effect, when the security guard character who monitors Obidallah's passing through the metal detector, says: "You look like no Arabic." In his act, Obidallah repeatedly reminds the audience that he is half Palestinian:

I always tell people I'm not white now anymore. And they go: 'well you look white'. I understand. But white to me in America is not skin color. Is status, is the way you're treated in society. [...] There's a difference between us and white people. White people never suffer as a group when a few people do something bad in their group. Middle-Eastern people do. And honestly, white people... let's be honest, you have a fair share of bad things: corporate scandals, President assassination, NASCAR, Paris Hilton, country music... That is audio terrorism to me. (*The Axis of Evil* 2007)

Obidallah not only refers to the sudden shift of racial categories that affected Arab Americans after 9/11, but he posits himself as not white in this excerpt, a fact that he repeats in other moments of the show: "I look white but it's my last name, Obidallah, that gets attention." Obidallah, however, has not always overtly self-identified as Arab in his career as a comedian. In the aftermath of 9/11, he shortly chose to perform as Dean Yosef, his first and middle names, in what he recognizes as a temporary need to downplay his Arab identity right after 9/11: "I was afraid Obidallah might spark some kind of argument in the audience. I'm right here in New York, right? A couple of blocks away from where the tragedy happened" (*America at a Crossroads* 2007). However, after thinking about it, he realized that precisely because of 9/11 he should perform as Arab in an effort to present to his audience a representation of Arab identity that was otherwise missing from the television news or mainstream media.

What is interesting from Obidallah's confession is the fact that he was able to downplay this Arab identity by changing his name, which underlines that it is not his physical appearance that is the main marker of his ethnic heritage. By 2003, when he co-founded the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, he had already made his Arab heritage an essential part of his public persona. He has kept this presentation of identity on stage ever since. In *The Axis of Evil* he refers to Arabs as "we," while he speaks of "white people" in the third person, and he only speaks of his whiteness in terms of what he *looks* like, not what he *is*. Because it counters the way he looks, Obidallah's self-positioning as not white, is an instance of rhetorical marginality. Besides being part of his activist persona, this rhetorical marginality allows Obidallah to construct his legitimacy as an Arab comedian.

Marginality on Stage

Gilbert makes a distinction between sociological and rhetorical marginality in stand-up comedy. While sociological marginality has no other option but to be performed—because the subject cannot escape it—rhetorical marginality is chosen (2004: 7). While I do not question whether Obidallah actually experiences marginality in his everyday life, I argue that his stage persona is highly based on rhetorical marginality. Obidallah recognizes that his adoption of a marginal identity is a conscious decision. Talking about his stage persona he admits: "I can be a tourist in it. I'm different, you know? Ahmed Ahmed cannot be a tourist. Some of these guys can't be tourists. I can choose to introduce myself into the conflict or not (*America at a Crossroads* 2007).

Here, his allusion to being “different” than other comedians who cannot pass as white, such as Ahmed Ahmed, and his framing of “choosing” to introduce himself into the conflict underlines the rhetorical dimension of his self-positioning as Arab in his stand-up. Being “a tourist in it” precisely conveys the performed dimension of his Arab heritage in his comedy. This performance is a temporary incursion into the identity of the “other.”

Social and rhetorical marginality, however, are not mutually exclusive features of comedy, as Gilbert indicates. For instance, comedians that are sociologically marginalized may decide to take advantage of their condition by taking the stage—which is always a rhetorical act. Also, the more sociologically marginalized the subject, the better chance they have to use that for rhetorical purposes. That is, you have to be perceived as legitimately marginal to be able to claim marginality on stage. This is precisely why Obidallah underlines his Palestinian half and downplays his very visible whiteness. Ahmed Ahmed presents another example of this dialogical relationship between social and rhetorical marginality. He mentions in *The Axis of Evil* that, multiple times, he has been the victim of erroneous profiling while traveling, because his name matches the name of a terrorist from one of the FBI’s “most-wanted” lists. In this case, what has probably been an unpleasant personal experience, related to *real* marginality, is invested in his act with a rhetorical dimension. As a rhetorical act, this confession is also a critique of profiling protocols that end up impacting people who have no relationship with terrorism.

We can understand Gilbert's definition of social marginality in a broad sense, to include not only traumatic experiences of disenfranchisement that certain social groups have, but also the processes through which the marginalized subject comes to understand and define himself as different from the mainstream social group. For instance, Palestinian American comedian Amer Zahr, who has a Muslim mother and a Christian father, recalled during his performance at the 8th Arab American Comedy Festival that, as a child, certain cultural practices that he experienced at home made him see the difference between his family and white Americans: "We are not white. I knew we were different: my dad talked funny, he smelled like garlic, we ate leaves. We were different." Zahr's experienced difference marked him and his family as outsiders in his childhood memories. On the stage, however, he turns those memories of the outsider, the marginal, into an articulation of rhetorical marginality. Simultaneously, by conveying on stage his condition of marginality to mainstream American society, he performs and constructs his Palestinian identity.

Aron Kader's self-positioning within the poles of his heritage and, consequently, his performed marginality, are ambiguous and fluid. In his performance, Kader shifts between self-identifying as American and/or Palestinian. In fact, he uses the unusual mix of his religious heritage as a comedy trope when, after introducing himself, he asks the audience: "Any Palestinian Mormons here?" (*The Axis of Evil* 2007) With this question Kader challenges assumptions that conflate religious identity with geographical origins. According to such assumptions Palestinians are Muslims and Mormons are from Utah. His unusual mix automatically brings these taken for granted categories under scrutiny.

Kader conveniently navigates the poles of his hyphenated identity to posit himself as an outsider to both his parents' religions. For instance, he explains that Mormons offered him the possibility to go on a mission when he was younger, and his answer was: "Yeah, look, to an Arab a mission is a whole different deal. Generally, we don't come back from those. But thanks for asking!" (*The Axis of Evil* 2007) While in this case he voices his answer from an Arab self-identification, in a different moment of the show he says that, "Arabs love to curse in English. They curse their heads off in English. They don't do it in Arabic because then... God can hear them. But in English there's no problem, because God doesn't speak English!" (2007) Here, Kader chooses to take a distance from the butt of his joke in order to criticize what he considers a hypocritical behavior. In both examples, he speaks about Arabs and Mormons from an outsider position, a resort that allows him to take distance from the group he is criticizing. Because he arguably represents both identities, however, he is able to evade the charge that he is stereotyping both groups with his critiques. This constant oscillation brings the comedian in close similarity to the trickster's "shape-shifting," a characteristic that allows him to adapt and survive in different circumstances (Hynes 1993: 36-37). At the 8th Arab American Comedy Festival, Mike Batayeh, of Jordanian descent, illustrated to what extent shape-shifting is not only an essential requirement on stage, but a strategy of survival off stage. Batayeh remarked: "I look Puerto Rican, that's convenient for when the anniversary comes." The anniversary, of course, is 9/11 and his *looking* Puerto Rican is a chance that he, like the trickster figures to which Hynes refers, conveniently embraces for personal advantage.

Preacher Moss presents yet another example of the overlap of social and rhetorical marginality. Before 2003, Moss' stand-up dealt mainly with racial issues, but when he began *Allah Made Me Funny*, he incorporated the religious topic into his comedy, saying: "See, I'm African American and Muslim. United States is scared of two things: black people and Muslims. I got the best of both worlds." In Moss' case, his African American identity is visible on his stage persona and he could have hardly performed as a comedian without dealing with race issues. In fact, it was his stand-up dealing with racial issues that gained him the name of "the new Dick Gregory."² His religious beliefs, however, are not visible on stage. Hence, talking about being Muslim is a conscious decision. With this strategy, Moss presents himself as the subject of a double marginal condition, racial and religious. Yet, by making public that he is a Muslim, Moss adds a plus to his performances that other African American comedians do not have and, conveniently, he caters to audiences' interest in Muslim comedy and Muslim identity post-9/11.

The Struggle for Positive Recognition

Moss has found a unique formula for merging into his comedy references to his experiences as an African American with the condition of Muslims after 9/11 in a way that makes his comedy stand apart from that of other Muslim comedians. Talking about the trial of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Houssein, Moss says: "Each day he walked into

² Dick Gregory is an African American comedian who began to perform in the early 1960s and used his comedy to advance his civil right activist's convictions.

court he took more and more what I call black tendencies. If you watched the trial you know Saddam couldn't win. That's pretty much like every African American in the United States" (2008). In this joke Moss constructs American justice as an all-powerful entity, while simultaneously insinuating that certain groups who are judged by this entity are likely to be found guilty regardless of their actual culpability. More than expressing an opinion about Saddam's trial, Moss is making a reference to the criminalization of black people in the United States (Conrad 2005, Martinot 2010, Tucker 2007). Here, Moss insinuates that African Americans have the same chances of winning a trial that Saddam had.

Moss is the only comedian in *Allah Made Me Funny* or *The Axis of Evil* who belongs to a social group that began fighting for their positive recognition in American society since long before Arabs and Muslims. Consequently, his comedy deals thoroughly with the problems of negotiating entrance into mainstream American society:

They had a slogan right after 9/11. Had a white little girl with the American flag, where she said: 'Why do they hate our freedom?' [to the audience] Let me explain this by saying [pauses] I've been black a long time... So, when the little girl goes 'Why do they hate our freedom?' I was like: that's easy, 'cause nobody else has any!' [...] Truth is, in the United States they use the word terrorist for Muslims 'cause, unfortunately, the words Indian, Mexican, and nigger are already used. [...] I've realized that some of the things we're dealing with... Folks, don't feel special! Muslims, don't feel special! Here's the scoop: hate's been around for years. And believe me, the same people that hate Muslims hated Asians, hated Latinos, hated blacks, hated Jews... (*Allah Made Me Funny* 2008)

While acknowledging the influence of 9/11, in this excerpt Moss indicates that the prejudices faced by Muslim Americans today are part of the larger process of struggle and negotiation that minorities face in order to achieve positive recognition in American society. By equating "terrorist" with some of the derogatory terms that has been used to

designate other groups, Moss brings into attention that discourses about terrorism can serve as a means to keep Muslim Americans at the margins of mainstream society by ascribing to them a supposedly abject identity. His invitation to not “feel special” exceeds a critique of Islamophobia to address the overall power structure of American society from which all minorities have, at some point, been excluded. The little white girl figure serves Moss to convey that the default, unmarked category of American is still white.

In the picture that Moss’ constructs for the audience, the little girl’s inability to understand “why they hate our freedoms,” conveys the lack of awareness with which the hegemonic white Christian middle-class thinks of itself as an accurate representation of all Americans. In doing so, he uncovers the Manichean divide that obscures the fact that not all social groups in America identify with the little girl’s “us.” Moss’ changes the direction of the discourse in an unexpected way when he answers for the audience the girl’s question, which is rhetorical. In Moss’ answer, he reveals that there are people who might have legitimate reasons for resenting hegemonic constructions of American identity. By shifting the discourse in such a way, Moss symbolically deprives the little girl and those on behalf on which she poses the question of their self-ascribed status of victims. In doing so, he points to the structural inequalities for which other groups might resent them.

In *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture*, Joseph Boskin indicates that, “American humor and the American Dream have been symbiotically entwined” throughout the United States history (1997: 15). His view is that in times of

social unrest and conflict, humor has served minorities to comment on the frustration and disappointment that come from feeling that the American Dream is not available to all members of society. At the same time, by making references to the American Dream even when it is to criticize it, stand-up comedy helps to keep the Dream alive. Boskin's thoughts richly complicate the meaning of Moss' exhortation to Muslim Americans to not "feel special." On the one hand, this exhortation is an overt critique of America's historically white Christian middle class hegemonic values. On the other hand, it is a discourse that posits Muslim Americans as the most recent minority to fight for positive recognition in a longer American history of social formation. And, since some of those minorities have eventually achieved positive recognition, Moss' exhortation suggests the possibility that Muslim Americans will too.

In *The Axis of Evil*, several of Obidallah's jokes also situate Arab Americans' desire for full integration into American society as part of a larger process: "I'm gonna be honest: when I've heard the expression 'Arabs are the new blacks' I got excited. I thought 'Oh my god, we're cool!'" In other part of his act he says: "I'm jealous. We don't get a whole month to celebrate our heritage like other groups in America. African Americans? Black History Month! Asians? Asian Awareness Month! Hispanic Awareness Month? What do we get? Orange Alert!" Like Moss', Obidallah's jokes are full of ambiguity and contain multilayered meanings. Certainly, in the most literal sense, he signals that Arabs are still far from achieving some of the positive representations that other groups have achieved in time. The idea of "black coolness," nonetheless, also works as a racial stereotype, one that coexists in society with instances of social

discrimination of African Americans. Thus, on one hand, the joke expresses a desire to achieve the other ethnic/racial group's "coolness." On the other hand, it conveys the persistent presence of essentializing racial constructs. His statement that the best Arab Americans get is "Orange Alert," and his desire to be considered "cool," situates Arab Americans in a worse position than the other American minorities. The comic effect comes from taking the marginality of Arab Americans to the extreme.

Scholars argue, and the Arab and Muslim Americans stand-up comedians affirm this when talking about their craft, that there is a relationship between humor and American minorities' negotiation for positive recognition in society. John Lowe indicates that, "although minorities have entered into full citizenship through long and arduous struggle, this procedure has sometimes been both shortened and sweetened when they have made up their minds to enter laughing" (1986: 439). Joseph Boskin and Joseph Darison look at the relationship between Jewish ethnic humor and social upward mobility and conclude that comedy is a particularly suitable instrument that affords "insights into the constant and often undignified struggle of upwardly striving Americans to achieve positive definition and respectable status" (1985: 97). Similarly, Giovanna Del Negro (2010) examines how female Jewish comics in the 1950s used humor to comment upon issues of Jewish ethnic/racial identity that American society was renegotiating at that time. The Palestinian American comedian Maysoon Zayid offers a similar perspective when she says that, "the Arab comedy thing is actually the ultimate American story. Because when you look at any immigrant group that tried to make it in America, that tried to integrate, that tried to raise against discrimination, they

all started using comedy” (*America at a Crossroads* 2007). In a similar way Azhar Usman asserts: “We’re proud of who we are and that means equally proud of the Muslim traditions as... it means being proud Americans. [...] We’re Muslims, we’re Americans and there’s no contradiction!” (*America at a Crossroads* 2007) Zayid and Usman’s statements reveal that Muslim and Arab American comedians are self-reflexive about the role of comedy in what Lowe calls “our national passion play and ritual, ‘Americanization’” (1986: 439).

These kind of public statements, linking comedy and the struggle of Arab and Muslim Americans to be fully accepted into society are directly related to the activist frame that these comedians give their art. Their yearning for positive recognition within American society comes from the fact that, like Usman, many of these comedians are proud Americans. They were either born or raised in the United States, went to American colleges, and identify with many American values. The importance of being a second generation immigrant in the struggle for the achievement of full recognition is reflected in *Allah Made Me Funny* by Mo Amer, who says: “[My Mom] says ‘talk about me all day, just don’t talk about politics’. And what she’s afraid of is ‘They’re gonna send us back. [...] I was like ‘Mom, we’re Palestinian; we’re stateless. Where are they gonna send us back to?’” Amer’s answer to his mother, whether real or constructed for comical purposes, shows a generational difference of confidence in the promises of the American Dream. For Amer’s mother, it is hard to believe that her son can make fun of politics without serious consequences; for the son, raised in the United States, it is common sense that talking about politics does not have such consequences. Authors

such as Moustafa Bayoumi (2008) and Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine (2008) have examined extensively the ways in which many young Arabs Americans define their hyphenated identities and their second-generation immigrant experiences. Among this group, the American experience comes hand in hand with a conscience that the United States offers civil and political freedoms that their parents' countries often lacked.

To some extent, it is the American half of these comedians' hyphenated identities that refuses exclusion. On stage, Jobrani adopts a serious attitude for a moment and says:

That's the beauty of this country, guys. We can have these debates. We can talk about this. We should be critical of government, of politicians. You should be! That's the beauty of this country. And that's why we have to have these open debates. I can't be making fun of the president of Iran in Iran, right? They'll be like 'Hey Maz, that was a good show! When it's your next show?' And I'll be like 'There are no more shows. The Ministry of No Shows showed up.' (*The Axis of Evil* 2007)

Jobrani's rendition of patriotism and praise of the American democratic values, despite being one of the few moments in his performance in which he does not mean any double entendre, is certainly ironic in a way that he probably ignores. For someone who participates in a show that repeatedly suggests that American freedoms have been damaged after 9/11 by overbearing security measures, this rendition shows a surprising confidence in the incorruptibility of those freedoms. For someone who claims to speak on behalf of America's "others"—who have suffered the consequences of those freedoms' damage—his speech suddenly sounds naive, if not demagogic. Certainly, this puts into perspective the constructed nature of his "otherness"—his rhetorical marginality, following Gilbert. But it also reveals the importance, for these comedians' craft and success, to self-identify as Americans in their strategic navigation of

hyphenated identities. This is because on stage, although it is necessary to demonstrate one's Arab or Muslim heritage to poke fun at these groups, it is equally necessary to pledge allegiance to the United States in order to mock its institutions and politicians and point at its social failures. However, Jobrani's speech exceeds strategic rhetorical self-positioning to connote optimism.

Such narratives of optimism appear frequently among Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedians. These kinds of narratives connect Arab and Muslim identity with the American Dream and construct the idea of linear progress towards a desired end in which positive recognition and full acceptance into society will happen for America's current "other." During the 6th annual edition of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival in May 2009, the television show *Arab American Beat* interviewed Aron Kader. In the interview Kader talks about the increasing popularity of the festival and his viewpoint about its future:

Reporter: You're here at the headlining night of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival... what's the vibe?

Kader: Same as it is every night here. Packed... beautiful girls, and beautiful people and... a really... very, very mixed crowd. This is the most diverse crowd that I've seen in the Arab Festival. It's not... I mean, it is predominantly Arab, but I have seen so many different ethnic groups here that I hadn't seen in the past. So, that means the festival is growing, is crossing over and there's just more and more people who want to come and check it out.

Reporter: How inspiring is that to you as a comedian?

Kader: It means that we don't have to do ethnic humor. It's just humor! You know? It's crossed over to every group. And the goal would be... that in the next... let's say we're just half way through and... in the next six years, we're just gonna be talking about girls and guys, and food, and... whatever, you know? We don't even have to mention our ethnicity. We just... are comedians who happen to be Arab. (*Arab American Beat* 2009)

In this narrative, Kader describes an ideal future in which “ethnic humor” is no longer needed because Arab Americans would have already achieved positive recognition in American society. This utopic view of the future and the role that Arab stand-up comedy plays in its arrival is inherently contradictory. First, his divide between “ethnic humor” and “just humor” ignores that, whether their humor is more or less politically explicit, American comedians who “happen to be Arab” talking about “girls, and guys, and food” from an Arab perspective is almost the perfect definition of ethnic humor. The ethnic nature of their humor does not merely depend on its content, but also on the position of Arab Americans as an ethnic group in American society. As long as Arabs are considered non-white, their humor is by definition “ethnic.” Additionally, it is very questionable how easy it is to change your profile as a comedian once you have established your public persona as a Arab American who talks about being Arab in America and, consequently, the kind of audiences’ judgments about authenticity that the shift would probably imply. Let us not forget that Kader is one of the Arab American comedians whose heritage is less physically “visible.” His comedic persona is built on his Arab heritage. It is precisely by deploying rhetorical marginality on stage and making explicit his Middle Eastern heritage that Kader propelled his career in comedy in the first place. This paradox within Kader’s discourse affects all Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern comedians who have launched their careers after 9/11 by dealing with ethnic/religious identity issues in their performances: their success in comedy comes hand in hand with the existence of Islamophobic prejudices in the United States.

STAND-UP COMEDY AND BAKHTINIAN CARNIVAL

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin defines medieval carnival as the time of the year when the subversion of ordinary power relations and overturn of the social order are socially sanctioned. Carnival is “the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (*à l’envers*), of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (1984: 11). For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is always full of ambiguity. Because of its continuous remaking, its cyclical nature, carnival is both an opportunity for transformation and a process of reinvigoration of the social order. In this section I discuss Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy after 9/11 in the light of Bakhtin's theorization of carnival. I argue that Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy, in part, subverts Islamophobic discourses and temporarily reverses the power relations that make these discourses possible. In its carnivalesque dimension, Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy degrades public figures that represent Islamophobic ideologies and present narratives in which the Arab or Muslim American “other” momentarily overcomes his marginal status, raising above those who have the power to discriminate against him. I also discuss how this kind of comedy draws on and reinforces the ideals of an American society open to full recognition of all minorities. Thus, Arab and Muslim stand-up comedy after 9/11 engages in a complex dialog of both opposition and compliance with American hegemonic ideologies.

The Upside Down Logic

The Arab American Comedy Festival usually closes with a Haram Show. *Haram*, which in Arabic language means “forbidden” or “sacred,” refers to things and actions prohibited in Islam as sins, such as adultery, murder, or alcohol and pork consumption. Additionally, *haram* refers to some things that are usually allowed but forbidden under certain circumstances, such as the consumption of food during daytime in Ramadan. In the Haram Show, stand-up comedians joke about topics either totally prohibited or regarded as inappropriate to discuss in public by strict Islamic standards. In 2011, Jordanian American comedian Myke Batayeh, who has participated in several annual editions of the Festival, hosted the Haram Show. I attended the show with the expectation of finding the least religious crowd at the Festival. Looking at the people sitting around me I observed that, except for two young women at the back of the club, none of the female spectators wore the *hijab*. Upon taking the stage, Batayeh asked the audience how many religious people were in the room, which elicited almost no reaction from the crowd. This formality undoubtedly allowed Batayeh to get a sense of how far he and the other comedians could go with their jokes that night.

Indeed, many of the comedians dealt with topics that one does not commonly sense does not expect to hear from Arabs. For instance, Batayeh compared the ability of women at oral sex in relation with their ethnicities to conclude that “white girls are the best not because of their technique but because they don’t complain, no matter how long it takes.” Kareem Omary, born in Kuwait and raised in the United States, wondered: “Is it racist to tell a Middle Eastern woman she has a camel toe?” Omary also told the

audience that he was profiled once at La Guardia Airport and bent over to describe his position while his cavities were searched. He recalled feeling that the person performing the search was wearing “a Super Bowl ring.” Joe Derosa talked extensively about his tendency to drink until he feels sick and wake up covered in his own vomit. Aron Kader made use of economics jargon to joke about the differences between the current president of the United States and his predecessor. In Kader’s words, “Obama’s huge stimulus package” is “much bigger than Bush’s [...] Bush’s was so small and ineffective.”

While the *haram* label suggests that the show overturns Islamic puritanism, in practice, most of the comedians and the audience members do not abide by Islamic beliefs in the first place. Batayeh described his religious upbringing by saying: “I was raised Catholic, but that’s fucking boring, isn’t it?” Omary was raised in an interreligious household, with a Syrian Muslim father and a South American Catholic mother. Kader, I have already mentioned, self-identifies on stage as an atheist. Recall also that Derosa not only does not self-identify as a religious person but, except during the Festival, he does not self-identify as Arab. While the show deserves some credit for challenging mainstream representations of Arabs as people constrained by moral conservative values, its religious transgression is also limited by its gendered nature. Although male performers outnumber female performers in all the shows of the Festival, the Haram Show featured exclusively male comedians. The absence of women in the Haram Show suggests that, in general, Arab female comedians in general still do not engage in their performances with topics that trouble gender expectations. Nevertheless, by dealing with

sexual content, the Haram Show exemplifies the potential within Arab and Muslim stand-up comedy after 9/11 to act as a carnivalesque force.

Bakhtin's perspective on the carnival is rather optimistic, almost utopian. He indicates that carnival is a liberatory force that "discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life" (33). Similarly, Mary Douglas' work examines the role of jokes as social anti-rites, stating that "whatever the joke, however remote its subject, the telling of it is potentially subversive. Since its form consists on a victorious tilting of uncontrol against control, it is an image of the leveling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones" (1975: 152). Roger Abrahams (1977) has also examined the capacity of performance to change the social order. Abrahams does not refer specifically to comedy, but his definition of play enactments fits with this genre. According to Abrahams, enactments are "heightened events" that depart from the ordinary but, at the same time, become more real because they "take the motives of the everyday and bring them into some new perspective, allowing us to see them as part of some larger patterns of existence" (80).

Abrahams warns of the difficulty of analyzing an enactment when we isolate it from ordinary life, because enactments "stylize and epitomize the everyday" (84). This stylization of everyday experiences may provide—for both the stand-up comedian and the audience—a great freedom for "critical reexperiencing" of an ordinary event (80). "The ludicrous comments upon society and its orders, and not always very kindly" (90), says Abrahams. This definition of play, when applied to stand-up comedy, allows us to think

about the role of the comedian as a critic of the social order. Muslim and Arab American stand-up comedy is a playful event that turns Islamophobic discourses upside down and allows audiences and comedians to look critically at those discourses.

The overturn of discourses is a common feature of Arab and Muslim American comedians' work and their need to better explain Arab and Muslim identity after 9/11. With every joke that addresses the stereotypes affecting their ethnic and religious groups, Arab and Muslim American comedians take a carnivalesque stance and talk back to Islamophobia. In doing so, they deconstruct some of the most pervasive negative images affecting Arabs and Muslims and reveal the logical fallacies inherent in those images. Recall how Azhar Usman's challenges the idea that there is an external physical marker of terrorist identity by saying: "if I was a crazy Muslim fundamentalist terrorist about to hijack the plane, this is probably not the disguise I'd go with" (*Allah Made Me Funny* 2008). Images of how the "other" is supposed to look like account for why many Americans supported Islamophobic profiling policies after 9/11 (Cainkar 2009, Cole 2003). Therefore, by revealing the absurdity of the images, Arab and Muslim American comedians help to undermine the public endorsement of those policies. In addition, the comedians provide an alternative to the disproportionate amount of violent representations about Arabs and Muslims existing in the media and popular culture (Salaita 2008, Anas Al-Shaikh-Ali 2011, Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008).

Playing with Reality and Image

The sketch with which *The Axis of Evil* begins, in which Kader and Obidallah cover their heads with the Palestinian scarf offers up rich interpretations when examined in light of Bakhtin's idea of the mask in carnival. According to Bakhtin the mask is the “peculiar interrelation of reality and image,” intertwined with “parodies, caricatures, grimaces, eccentric postures, and comic gestures” (39-40). Like the mask in carnival, the scarf functions in the sketch as an extraordinary object, one that neither Kader nor Obidallah would wear outside of an event framed as performance. Like the mask, it plays with “reality and image,” offering the comedians a possibility to play with the Arab stereotype and their experienced identity. By covering their heads with the scarf, these comedians draw on existing caricatures of Arabs. Such caricatures include the tendency to present angry Arab men wearing the scarf (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008: 61-85). Thus, Kader and Obidallah’s use of the scarf is not a parody of real Arabs as much as it is a parody of mainstream media portrayal of Arabs.

Bakhtin believes the mask in carnival “is connected to the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity” (39). In *The Axis of Evil*, the sketch of Palestinian scarfs is a metonym of the whole show. If the show deals with the stereotypes ascribed to those that allegedly belong to “the axis of evil,” the scarfs are certainly the first stereotype to be mocked, the first instance of an “evil” identity. They allow Kader and Obidallah to momentarily embody and present their Palestinian identity to audiences in shorthand. They allow them to wear the Arab mask. If the show is a journey of transformation in which the

comedians, who start by embodying the “evil,” end up as members of an American minority demanding positive recognition in American society, then the scarf is a visual marker of this transformation. It helps the audiences navigate the narrative of the marginal character—the stereotypical Arab with his head covered—who struggles for acceptance, but gets closer to acceptance only when he leaves that which marks him as Arab.

The upside down logic of the carnival also appears in *Allah Made Me Funny* in the form of narratives of symbolic reversal. For instance, in some of these narratives Moss, Amer, and Usman refer to Muslim gendered power structures in a way that counters recurring representations of Muslim women as oppressed (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008). In the comedians’ narratives the man is the victim and the woman is the one holding the power position. For instance, Amer alludes to his wife’s hot temperament and says that “marriage is a fantastic thing, really, as long as you know that the man has absolutely no decision making in the whole process.” In a different moment of his performance, Amer talks about the hard discipline and punishments his mother gave him when he was a child. In these references, he depicts his female relatives as strong characters whom he finds hard to oppose. Similarly, Usman states:

The Hollywood stereotypes are ridiculous. If you believed them, you’d believe that Muslim men are what? Terrorists! Muslim women are...? Oppressed! Have these people been inside of a Muslim household? If they would go inside they would realize they have exactly the opposite! [Screaming] MUSLIM WOMEN ARE TERRORISTS! MUSLIM MEN ARE OPPRESSED! (*Allah Made Me Funny* 2008)

The comedy in these situations comes from the contrast between commonly held beliefs that Muslim women must obey their male relatives, and the portrayal of women as

characters who terrorize Muslim men.

Moss ties his discussion about Muslim women with the American political context and tells the audience that, “after 9/11 the sisters are kind of rough.” He mentions a situation he experienced in a bus in Philadelphia where some bullies tried to try to take off the scarf of a Muslim Jamaican woman. Humorously, Moss declares he tried to do everything to stop them: “DON’T DO IT! She’ll kill us all!” He reverses the power relationship between the woman and the bullies. Following Douglas, Moss employs a “joke pattern that needs two elements, the juxtaposition of a control against that which is controlled, this juxtaposition being such that the latter triumphs.” For Douglas, “a successful subversion of one form by another completes or ends the joke, for it changes the balance of power” (1975: 150). In this story, Moss reverses the victim-aggressor dynamics in a carnivalesque way. While the beginning of the story points to the Muslim woman’s vulnerability as the subject of hate violence, at the end it presents the woman as the assertive character. She emerges with the image of someone who will not accept any disrespectful behavior and who is so capable of defending herself that it is actually the safety of the bullies that is in question.

The Carnavalesque Body

Bakhtin also argues that carnival represents the human body with its earthly dimensions in order to lower those in power. He maintains that, “to degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception,

pregnancy, and birth” (21). For Bakhtin, carnival presents a universalized body because portrayal of physiological functions equates all bodies regardless of the social strata to which they belong. This body works in carnival as a metonym of humankind. Kader’s reference to the presidential “packages” at the 8th New York Arab American Comedy Festival is a carnivalesque representation in which “the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 1984: 20). The references to Obama and Bush’s “packages” are instances of Bakhtinian grotesque realism. Kader lowers both presidents from their official position: by talking about their sexual organs he momentarily brings them down to earth.

The treatment of both politicians, however, differs considerably in comparison. Although Kader ascribes to Obama a hackneyed racial stereotype, he still places Bush in the position of disadvantage. The remark about Bush’s “small package” is an allusion to a reduced sexual capability, in which “small” stands for insufficient or, to some extent, an immature, not-yet-developed sexual ability. It builds on discourses regarding Bush’s political and intellectual incapability, adding a physical dimension. With this addition, Kader’s portrays the former president as a good-for-nothing figure, a fool who is the ideal butt for jokes. Recall Kader’s impression in *The Axis of Evil*, in which he portrays Bush as a belligerent character who deflects questions about the war from the press. In that portrayal, the aggressive and arrogant Bush dismisses the questions because, ultimately, the press is an obstacle in a war project that he has decided to undertake

regardless of its justification. The juxtaposition of Kader's representations of Bush in *The Axis of Evil* and the Festival result in a character that is sexually and intellectually inept but aggressive and invested in military invasion, an archetype of masculine compensatory behavior¹. The portrayal undermines Bush's political legitimacy, by alluding to the fact that his decisions might come from a deviant personality and a questionable psychological maturity or infantile condition. This is consistent with the fact that he occupied a political position previously held by his father. By employing humor to undermine the former president's legitimacy, Kader lowers Bush from his power position, ridiculing his supposed strength. Kader's stand-up in this moment functions as a symbolic "uncrowning," a reversal of the power structure (Bakhtin 1984: 11).

For Bakhtin, grotesque realism relates to ambivalence and transformation, it reflects a time of change, renovation and renewal: "One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated and born" (26). Based on this Bakhtinian idea, I suggest that Kader applies a treatment of grotesque realism to a temporal succession of

¹ Kader is not the only comedian who has mocked George W. Bush's warrior image and masculinity in relation with his inability as politician. Comedian Will Farrell, in his HBO special *Your Welcome America: A Final Night with George W. Bush*, mocked the president's landing on USS Abraham Lincoln to give the "Mission Accomplished" speech that signaled the end of the major combat operations in Iraq in May 2003. On that occasion the president wore a flight suit that accentuated his genital area and elicited rumors that he might have been wearing a codpiece. In a moment during Farrell's show, the comedian wears a similar suit to give the audience a speech about the military operations in Iraq. In Farrell's impression, Bush considers such military operations as "sending trained monkeys to fight and perform at children's parties" and recognizes that he "didn't have a plan" for Iraq.

events. Notice that Kader marks time in his narrative by employing different verbal tenses—Obama’s package “is,” while Bush’s “was.” Kader’s depiction accounts for a succession of events, a cycle that ends with another that begins, which is essential in Bakhtinian grotesque realism. This succession of events, this transition from a president with an insufficient virility to one with an exaggerated virility projects an idea of advance, a progress from a shameful past to a heroic present. This kind of narrative reflects the hope inherent in Obama’s election for Arab and Muslim Americans—a black president and son of a Muslim man whose middle name is Houssein. Obama symbolizes the carnivalesque dimension of social renewal.

Carnavalesque Utopia and the Social Order

For Bakhtin, carnival “must be sanctioned not by the world of practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is, by the world of ideals. Without this sanction there can be no festivity” (9). The scope of the carnival is, for Bakhtin, universal and inclusive because the carnivalesque spirit does not recognize any order outside of its own and seeks to integrate every member of society. The optimistic narratives of Muslim and Arab American stand-up comedians, that humor potentially leads to a future in which Arab and Muslim Americans will achieve full integration in the United States, resembles egalitarian and utopic carnivalesque ideals. These narratives construct a utopian world and posit comedy as a means to achieve it. This is evident in the song called “One World” by hip-hop songwriter Tyson Amir, which plays on the background of the final credits in the *Allah Made Me Funny* DVD:

*If you love the most high be kind to mankind,
 want for your brother what you want in due time.
 If you heed this advice everything will be fine.
 Because there is only one world baby, yours and mine. (Allah Made Me Funny
 2007)*

The position of this song at the end of the performance conveys both a message of hope (“everything will be fine”) and celebration of unity in diversity (“only one world baby, yours and mine”). The utopian drive, “the highest aims of human existence” to which Bakhtin refers, appears here as a desire for “one world” that would not only accommodate the diversity of mankind but bring people together in fraternity. Dean Obidallah also underlines the desire for a better world when talking to the press about the role of the Arab American Comedy Festival. He says: “Most of all, we want to change the world.” (*America at a Crossroads* 2007) These references to a better world raise the question of how that one world might look like. The ideals of a society that is both egalitarian and celebrates difference also relates to the idea of multiculturalism in American society (Taylor et al. 1994). This concept has often been criticized by authors who are suspicious of the idea of harmony it encloses—who indicate that it conceals class differences and, consequently, facilitates the triumph of a unique economic liberal ideal (Jacoby 1994, Higham 1993). Maysoon Zayid’s statement that “the Arab comedy thing is actually the ultimate American story” similarly raises the question of what that “American story” is and, most importantly, whose “story” gets to represent all Americans (*America at a Crossroads* 2007).

American stand-up comedy is very much interconnected with the view of the American Dream as “opportunity in business as well in politics.” By continuously

making reference to the Dream, stand-up comedians reify its importance (Boskin 1997: 23). In the case of Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy, the American Dream manifests itself in discourses that link humor with the promise of achieving positive recognition in society. In this sense, stand-up comedy works as a force that both challenges and reifies the existing social order. This ties into Bakhtin's idea of carnival, which "asserts and denies [...] buries and revives" (12). The process of renewal that is inherent in carnival implies both continuities and ruptures with the social order. This leaves the question whether carnival's consequences are really revolutionary, radical change—whether they are anything beyond what carnival visibly brings about while it lasts: the most radically grotesque mocking of the existing order.

Barbara A. Babcock (1978) viewpoint about symbolic inversions such as those inherent in humor, illustrates Bakhtin's idea that carnival both asserts and denies the social order. Babcock suggests that, "all symbolic inversions define a culture's lineaments at the same time as they question the usefulness and the absoluteness of this ordering" (29). If carnival reifies the very things it denies, then how does the carnivalesque spirit challenge the social order? Towards an answer, Roger D. Abrahams and Richard Bauman's (1978) look at social struggles and conflict as processes that cut across festivities and ordinary life. Their work on festivals in West Indies and Nova Scotia shows that an understanding of carnival time as completely separated from ordinary time in a given society is problematic. This is because individuals who fully participated in the festivals and its rites of symbolic inversion of the social order were also likely to display behaviors outside the time of the festivals in which they challenged

the social order. Abrahams and Bauman's findings provide a way to relate symbolic inversions in socially sanctioned circumstances with broader social struggles for change and challenge of the social order. In their model, the social order is the result of conflicting social forces that coexist in a specific place and time. While festivals may provide a safety valve to canalize forces that potentially jeopardize the existing social order, these forces do not completely cease to exist when festivals end. Therefore, in times of symbolic inversion, such as festivals—and stand-up comedy—those forces that already exist in society to question the validity of the social order surface and become more visible.

This is applicable to Muslim and Arab American stand-up comedy after 9/11. This comedy is neither an isolated case of struggle against Islamophobia nor able by itself to challenge Islamophobic prejudices. It is just one of the forms that the struggle against Islamophobia has taken in the United States. By giving public voice to this struggle in a way that is likely to reach an audience beyond anti-Islamophobic activism supporters, stand-up comedy is likely to reinforce, dynamize, and give visibility to anti-Islamophobia activism. This feedback relationship is clearer to see by looking at the organizations that support the Arab American Comedy Festival. For instance, the Network of Arab-American Professionals (NAAP) and the New York Chapter of the Arab-American Institute (AAI) sponsored the 8th edition of the Festival. The mission of the NAAP is partly to “educate both the Arab-American and non-Arab communities about Arab culture, identity, and concerns” (Network of Arab American Professionals). Similarly, the AAI is a non-profit, nonpartisan national leadership organization that

seeks to increase the participation of Arab Americans in American politics. Its website enumerates some of the main consequences of Islamophobia in American society:

The sweeping counterterrorism measures implemented during the emotional aftermath of September 11th were presented as necessary protections, but were based on the false dichotomy of safeguarding our national security or our civil liberties. The result since has been a steady erosion of our most basic freedoms; enforcement measures that foster mistrust; and policies that have proved both unreasonable and ineffective. Many of these initiatives have targeted Arab Americans and continue to be of particular concern, such as the greatly increased powers of search and seizure, enhanced by provisions in the PATRIOT ACT and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act; racial profiling; selective law enforcement; prosecutorial discretion; the use of secret evidence; indefinite detention; lack of due process; and refusal of the right of habeas corpus. (Arab American Institute)

These statements suggest a certain ideological convergence between these organizations' and the Arab American Comedy Festival.

This interrelation of activism and comedy is an example of how the carnivalesque spirit works to transcend its limits as an event framed for symbolic inversion and to extend its reach to ordinary everyday circumstances. Returning to Abrahams and Bauman (1978), social forces that strive to change the status quo can work simultaneously in festive and ordinary circumstances. This goes against Bakhtin's distrust of modern parodies, which he does not see as having the carnivalesque spirit and goals. His view is that in our modern society the potential of the carnival as a revolutionary force has been cut down to a "holiday mood" (33). Modern parodies lack "the essentials [of the carnival]: the all-human character, the festivity, utopian meaning, and philosophical depth" (16). For Bakhtin, once the carnivalesque body—its grotesque representation of anatomic functions and the cyclical nature of life and death—is left out of socially sanctioned festivities, only satirical laughter remains. And, satirical laughter is

“not laughter but rhetoric” (51). Bakhtin leaves unanswered why, in fact, he dismisses the subversive potential of rhetoric in comparison with that of carnival. However, Bakhtin’s spurious separation of body and rhetoric does not hold up in stand-up comedy.

In Muslim and Arab American stand-up comedy rhetoric is embodied. Assuming the identity of the “other” on stage and talking on his behalf is a rhetorical act that cannot be separated from the comedians’ ethnic and religious identities (often, physically embodied) and their status as potential victims of Islamophobic stereotypes. As Gilbert’s (2004) notion of rhetorical marginality on stage suggests, Muslim and Arab stand-up comedians employ their appearance, that is, their body, to advance an anti-Islamophobic rhetoric. Moreover, even if in strict Bakhtinian sense, stand-up comedy is closer to satire—rhetoric—, Arab and Muslim American comedians’ challenge of Islamophobia certainly includes the utopian drive and universal character that Bakhtin defines as inherent to carnival.

Thus, Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy may not eradicate Islamophobia just by poking fun at the principles that sustain it, but it is certainly part of a larger group of social forces that work against the prejudices affecting Arab and Muslims Americans after 9/11. Hence, the carnivalesque principle transcends the limits of the comedic moment to reach also into ordinary time. James C. Scott’s (1990) idea of political resistance as a hidden transcript against the official transcript of power elites helps to understand how the politics of Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy works in current American society. Scott’s theory of resistance reaffirms Abrahams and Bauman’s (1978) viewpoint that subversive social forces do not limit themselves to

festivities but take the form of everyday subversive actions. Scott maintains that, “any argument which assumes that disguised ideological dissent or aggression operates as a safety-valve to weaken ‘real’ resistance ignores the paramount fact that such ideological dissent is virtually always expressed in practices that aim at an unobtrusive renegotiation of power relations” (1990: 190). Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy, then, not only provides a pleasurable venue to momentarily criticize Islamophobic discursive formations. It is a form of “disguised resistance, of infrapolitics” and “the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance” (199).

Stand-up comedy is one of the most visible faces of the political forces in post-9/11 American society struggling against Islamophobic definitions and representations of Arab and Muslim identities. Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy acts as a carnivalesque force, one that has the potential to both subvert and renew the social order. In its carnivalesque dimension, it degrades public figures representing Islamophobic ideologies and presents narratives in which the “other” momentarily gets the power position. Filled with carnivalesque egalitarian ideals, this kind of comedy narratively constructs a future in which Arab and Muslim Americans will achieve positive recognition and defeat Islamophobic ideologies. In doing so, it appeals to the ideals of the American Dream, according to which society is open to full recognition of all minorities. Thus, in its carnivalesque dimension, post-9/11 Arab and Muslim stand-up comedy maintains a complex relationship, of both challenge and reification, with the social order.

CONCLUSION

The end of George W. Bush presidency deprived Arab and Muslim comedians of some of the urge to make marked political comments. Bush's public figure, with its ideological position on the Arab and Muslim world, provided an excellent opportunity to make comedy with political content. Arab and Muslim stand-up comedians are certainly aware of this. "To me, Bush was amazing. He was the greatest writer of comedy we ever had. [...] There is a different tone in America now with president Obama and our community feels less under siege, but we'll still be making jabs at him," said Obidallah during the 2009 Festival (Reinl 2009). Kader confirms Obidallah's viewpoint: "As a comedian, and I can speak for all comedians, we're gonna miss Bush." (*Aron Kader at ANERA* 2008) What happens with Arab and Muslim stand-up comedy after Bush? What possibilities are open for the evolution of the genre beyond the bold political critique of its first years?

My own experience as participant observer at the Festival in 2011 suggests that, indeed, the kind of political comments—in the narrow reference of "political" to those public figures and institutions holding executive power at a given moment—that appear in *Allah Made Me Funny* and *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* are now marginal. Kader's joke about the size of the presidential "packages" at the 2011 Festival was, in fact, an exception. An overwhelming majority of the comedians performing during the Festival dealt in their acts with a range of cultural everyday differences between Arabs and the rest of Americans. Topics such as arranged marriages, Middle Eastern food, Arabs'

proverbial verbosity and ability to bargain, differences between Arabs depending on their national origins, Arabs' alleged parental strictness in education, etc. appeared time and again in the performances.

At the Festival, references to 9/11, airport security, the PATRIOT ACT, and Arab and Muslim profiling for security purposes were infrequent and made in a tone that was more evocative of a time when things looked worse, than anything else. The fact that Kader could not help but poke fun at the former president suggests that, as Bush's relevance fades, certain nostalgia about his appeal as comedic material still pervades. In fact, by comparing Obama to Bush, Kader found a way to include the latter in his act and therefore, to reprise his famous impression of the former president. His nostalgia shows the complex relationship between Islamophobia, the political context immediately after 9/11, and the activism and artistic/historical opportunity that prevails in Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy. The paradox is that, even if political discourses were more overtly hostile to Arabs and Muslims under Bush's administration, they made for great comedy. Comedians drew a lot of their performance material from a time when politicians and media representations were most biased against anything related to—or perceived to relate to—Islam, and the American public was more exposed to a constant flux of (mis)information about Islamic identity.

To be fair, that this tendency to revisit Bush's figure can be read as nostalgic is a consideration set apart from ideological stances. It does not mean that the comedians who indulge into this nostalgia in their performances are not glad that the former president is no longer in the office. Islamophobic prejudices did not begin with George

W. Bush's administration and have not gone away with it. As Maysoon Zayid makes clear, "our community is not out of the woods. Obama was elected, but a rainbow didn't suddenly appear over the Middle East and there is still a lot of confusion about what Arabs are—that the words 'Arab' and 'Muslim' are not synonymous. There is still a long way to go" (Reinl 2009). Thus, by suggesting that there is such a nostalgic tendency I am not making a judgment about any time when comedy *was better*. Arguably it was more relevant, if anything, due to the constant presence in the media of information affecting Muslims and Arabs. Finally, one cannot blame Kader for clinging onto his impression of Bush, which has been for a long time one of his most successful and repeated gimmicks and has granted him many minutes of applause and cheers in recent years. Perhaps his reluctance to give up on Bush as a source of humor confirms that the popular saying: "it is more difficult to overcome success than failure," applies to comedians too. Kader's stated desire to perform "just humor," flies in the face of his delight in that impression: the popularity of the genre came hand in hand with the Islamophobic stereotypes it is supposed to fight. In other words, the very thing Arab and Muslim comedians struggle to eradicate is the cause of their success. Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy, in short, is a complex phenomenon in which activism and opportunity—social struggle and personal benefit—are inextricably united.

Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy draws on and reinterprets American minorities' use of humor as a means to negotiate national belonging. It is a means by which Arab and Muslim American comedians negotiate and perform their identity on stage. A reflection of the social forces in conflict within post-9/11 America, it

dialogs with Islamophobia and the political discourses both fueling and taking advantage of it. Indeed, Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy and Islamophobia are competing transcripts (Scott 1990), contending over definitions of Arab and Muslim American identity through opposing representation of those identities. American stand-up comedy has always questioned but also reified the American Dream. Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy is no exception. It both challenges and reinforces hegemonies in American society. Its evolution from overtly political to a more self-deprecating content in Arab and Muslim American stand-up comedy suggests that the genre is adapting to new social and political circumstances that Arabs and Muslims face in the United States.

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